CAMBRIDGE MATTERS # 19

By: Commissioner Steve Rideout

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The City Council met in public work session at 5:00 p.m. to discuss a proposal for accounting services by the accounting firm that has done the Audit of the City the past few years. The city has had some difficulty in finding and keeping finance directors, and so the city manager suggested that we consider having a firm do the work. The purpose of the work session was to listen to the proposal by Roy Geiser of TGM Group from Salisbury.

As the finance director recently has ended her services with the city and there are a number of important financial items to be addressed in the coming months including preparation for the FY 2021 budget and the annual audit, the city manager decided that the city needed some immediate assistance with these and other financial matters moving forward.

Mr. Geiser discussed how his firm could help the city with its financial matters in a more effective way by training staff, reviewing key policies and procedures and making recommendations for improvements, and reviewing and assessing current accounting procedures and how effectively the city staff use the Edmonds financial software that has been used by the Municipal Utilities Commission for years but was only implemented this year for the remainder of the city financial work.

The proposal included weekly consulting by a senior staff member of the TGM Group as well as the services of Mr. Geiser in developing the required GASB Financial Statements for a new auditor that the city would need to hire. By doing these and other things, the city would have a better trained staff, a more effective accounting and financial system, and would be able to reduce the costs of the audit all of which would be benefits to the city.

After the presentation, some questions and discussion by the City Council, the city manager was asked to talk further with Mr. Geiser and to determine what the costs would be for the remainder of the current fiscal year, where the monies would come from to pay for this FY services, and what the costs would be for FY 2021. While I had a concern about the need to issue an RFP for these services in the future, the need to have someone available quickly who knew the city’s financial workings was most important given what the current needs are. The City Manager will meet with Mr. Geiser and bring back a proposal to City Council at the 2nd meeting in March. He will also seek from those companies that responded to the RFP for auditor services a modification of their bids based on the services and documentation that TGM Group will be providing for the auditing firm that will simplify their work. If this proposal is adopted by City Council, the company rather than a city employee will be responsible for the financial reporting as well as the training of the city financial staff to ensure consistency of the reporting and documentation.

At 6:00 p.m. the Regular Meeting of City Council was called to order. I made a motion to amend the agenda to remove a matter but did not receive a second, so the agenda was adopted as presented. The first matters were public comments.

Mr. Foxwell came forward to report on trash being left on Cedar Street that was not being picked up. He also mentioned that there were many people in cars from different states who have come to Cambridge to watch and photograph the ducks and geese at the end of Oakley Street. He further had questions of Commissioner Cannon about what has happened to the Banner Newspaper and how can he meet with anyone to discuss those concerns. Commissioner Cannon advised Mr. Foxwell that he would be happy to meet with him wherever he wanted.

Chuck McFadden, President of CAN, came forward at the request of the CAN Board to thank Susan Webb for all the great work that she and the Code Enforcement staff are doing to improve the condition of housing in the City. He indicated that this is the first time in a long time that citizens have been happy about the progress that is being made regarding Code Enforcement. He also asked that as part of the reorganization of DPW that the Code Enforcement Office be placed directly under the City Manager and that the city consider adding to the Code Enforcement staff as part of the budget process.

The next item on the agenda was “Requests from the Public”. This was the matter that I wanted removed from the agenda, as it was really more a request that city staff report on what they had done and what was being done regarding the cabin at 207 High Street that is called the “Slave Cabin”. Staff filed written reports and photographs regarding the matter and orally reported that the concerns raised by the neighbor at 205 High Street had been addressed by the owner of 207 High Street and that the interior repairs to the cabin had been successfully completed and certified by the MDIA inspector.

Larry Mills, the owner of 205 High Street, then sought to ask questions of the city staff to which I objected as the matter was supposed to be a “Request from the Public” and not a questioning of the work of city staff. He then spoke on his concerns regarding the cabin that included it leaning, it having lead paint on it, his belief that it had structural problems, who would pay if the cabin fell on his property, some broken facia, and his refusal to have any work on the building be done from his side of the property line. At the conclusion of his statement, the Mayor directed that he meet with the City Manager to discuss his concerns. Commissioner Foster, who had been absent during this part of the meeting, returned and asked to be included in any meetings between Mr. Mills and city staff. The outcome that resulted was what I was seeking to happen without staff having to make a report to City Council, as I believed that under the Charter this was a matter for the City Manager and staff to resolve.

The Consent Calendar was then taken up on my motion and second by Commissioners Cannon and Hanson and was passed 5-0. The items approved included the following:

* The Meeting Minutes of February 24with a minor correction.
* The request of Chesapeake College to hold an event in the municipal parking lot behind the Cambridge Center on May 6th from 4-6 p.m.
* The request of Paul Dendorfer of Blue Ruin to have a “Masters Goes Blue” event in the alleyway behind the Blue Ruin on April 10th from 5-9 p.m.

There were no ordinances for first or second reading, so the next matters to be taken up were Old Business. The Cambridge Police Department asked that the city accept the Federal Byrne Justice Grant in the amount of $11, 836 and that the police budget be increased by that amount with half of the monies going to the city police department and half going to the county sheriff’s department. On my motion with a second by Commissioner Hanson, this passed on a vote of 5-0.

The next item was a request that we adopt Resolution No. 20-01 that accepted the terms and conditions required to receive the $510,000 CDBG grant from the state for the development of Cannery Park. On my motion and second by Commissioner Hanson, this was adopted on a vote of 5-0. I raised as a comment that the grant had many conditions and time limitation requirements and I wanted the city manager to be sure to have all the dates and timelines addressed and to have staff backup to make sure none were missed.

Under New Business, the Police Department asked that their Event Fund be reduced by $1,000 and that the Police Patrol K-9 account be increased by that amount. On Commissioner Sydnor’s motion and second by Commissioners Hanson and Cannon, that motion passed 5-0.

The final matter on the agenda was the request by city staff for permission to seek a $50,000 grant from the Maryland Department of Natural Resources to help with the development of Cannery Park. A public hearing was held at which no citizen spoke, and on a motion by Commissioner Hanson and second by me, the request passed on a vote of 5-0. If the grant is awarded, the monies will be used to draft construction documents to guide the design implementation of the park, demolish and clear debris in the park, grade the land, and do other things to the great lawn area and the overlook improvements. This will only be a portion of the monies needed to construct the park area.

During the concluding comments by the Mayor, Commissioners, and staff, the Mayor reported on two upcoming meetings of Eastern Shore Local Elected Officials both of which will be in Cambridge. Commissioner Sydnor asked that City Council have a work session on the preparations for the upcoming city election that is scheduled in October. That work session and one that I asked by held regarding Code Enforcement and the need to look at several specific issues were approved and will be coordinated by the city manager.

I also raised my concern about the need to have a lien placed against the properties at 505 and 507 Race Street as the result of over $100,000 in taxpayer funds expended to bring down and clear one of the buildings there that collapsed and created a public hazard. Secretary Holt of the Department of Housing and Community Development had asked that the city not place the lien. This request initially was honored in anticipation that there would be some discussion amongst the city, state, and private entities addressing the properties at 505, 507 and 509 Race Street and some compensation to the city to reimburse these costs. As no agreement had been reached and it appeared that some plans were being made to sell the 505 and 507 properties, I did not want the city funds that were used to clear up a portion of Race Street not be protected to the extent possible by the city. On my motion and second by Commissioner Foster, the commissioners voted 5-0 to have the city attorney record the appropriate lien documents as permitted by the law and any agreement that exists with Historic Cambridge, Inc. the owner of the properties.

During the final public comment portion of the Meeting, Mr. Foxwell stated that he felt the Long Wharf area of the city did not look good, especially the open and sandy areas of the parking lot where some plants should be placed. The Mayor asked that I investigate the matter, which I agreed to do.

There being no further business, the meeting adjourned.

Thanks for reading.

Steve