CAMBRIDGE MATTERS #17

 Commissioner Steve Rideout

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I hope that everyone continues to stay home as much as possible, wear a mask to help prevent you from becoming ill, and maintain a six-foot separation between you and others in community. Dorchester County has had very few people test positive for the virus and one death so far. From my observations, I am not seeing many people on the streets of the City, and those who seem to be following the directions of the Governor and health experts.

The only way to prevent this virus from continuing to spread is for each of us to do our job, which is to stay separated, wash our hands with soap every time you have or think you have touched something that might have the virus on it – a door knob, your car steering wheel, the groceries and the bags that you are bringing home from the store, the box or bag that is being brought to your home by a delivery person. If you don’t, that provides one more opportunity for you to become ill or for you to share the virus with someone you know or don’t know.

While we understand that most people can survive the virus, many become ill or very ill, and some, for reasons that we do not yet fully understand, fail to survive. Don’t take a chance that you might be one of those who does not make it.

Let’s all do our best to show the world that we did what we were asked to do so that we have the fewest possible number of people infected or who pass away. With that said, let’s talk about our April 13th City Council Meeting.

Preparing for Monday’s meeting had any number of challenges. We were going to be having our first Virtual City Council meeting with the Mayor being at Council Chambers, and the Commissioners being connected by the internet or phone. As our rules of procedure never anticipated the Covid-19 virus, we needed to change our rules in order to have our meeting outside of Council Chambers.

Shortly before the meeting began, we learned that the internet connection to Council Chambers had failed, but then it was restored. My internet at home then went down, as it did for other Commissioners, so some of us had to call in on a conference call line.

We started a few minutes late due to technical challenges, but the Mayor then led us in a moment of silence and the Pledge of Allegiance. The Agenda was then addressed. Commissioner Cannon moved to adopt it as presented. I suggested that we remove item 8 from the agenda and take it up at a closed meeting.

After some discussion, that was agreed to. The Mayor then suggested that we add a matter to New Business, which was a motion to allow us to hold Virtual Meetings of City Council during this time of Emergency. The reason for the motion is that our Charter requires all meetings to be at City Council Chambers unless the Commissioners approve another way to hold the meetings.

With the Meeting Agenda amended and adopted, the Mayor offered time for public comment to be made over a phone line to City Council Chambers. She waited a while in order that those listening on Town Hall Streams could then dial in, as there is about a 30 second delay between action occurring in Council Chambers and the display of that on computer screens. There were no public comments or requests from the public.

The Consent Calendar had two matters to be addressed. On My motion and second by Commissioner Hanson, the March 30th Council Meeting Minutes and a request to have the Groove City Culture FEST be held on August 15, 2020 from 1-7 p.m. between Elm and Washington Streets were approved on a vote of 5-0.

There were no Ordinances to be address, and so the first matter under Old Business was the report from the Mayor and Council Compensation Committee. Joe Brooks was the Chair and provided the findings and recommendations of the Committee. The report is lengthy, so I will not go into detail; but the Committee was unanimous on virtually all its recommendations that included the following:

* Maintain Mayor and Commissioner salaries as they are
* Remove health insurance and life insurance as benefits for the elected officials
* Maintain the city paying FICA on top of the salaries, providing cell phones and computers to those elected officials that want them, a potential state retirement benefit, and travel expenses to allow the elected officials to participate in training events through the Maryland Municipal League (MML).

The Commissioners had no questions or comments on the report or the presentation. As I thought it was simply going to be the presentation, I was going to suggest that the matter be put over to another meeting in order to allow the public to provide its thoughts on the report and recommendations. The Mayor suggested that we take a vote on the report, so I moved for the adoption of it and the preparation of an ordinance to be presented to the Commissioners for consideration and adoption based on the committee recommendations.

Commissioner Hanson seconded my motion. The City Attorney suggested that we adopt a Charter Change that would allow for the Commissioners in the future to make changes by Ordinance for compensation of elected officials for the following term of office, as is required by law. I agreed to that suggestion as did Commissioner Hanson. Upon a call of the vote of the Commissioners, only Commissioner Hanson and I voted in favor of the motion. The other three Commissioners abstained. Under voting procedures that are part of the city code, no ordinances can be adopted without at least 3 Commissioners voting in favor. I then asked that the matter be continued over to our next meeting to have further discussion and to have the opportunity to understand the basis of the abstentions by Commissioners Foster, Cannon, and Sydnor. That motion passed on a vote of 3-2 with Commissioner Cannon joining with Commissioner Hanson and myself.

This matter is something that we need to decide in a public forum after proper public notice and right to be heard. As the report details, most of the benefits and compensation that are available to the current elected officials were never formally approved by ordinance or resolution where the public was notified and given the opportunity to speak on the topics. Over 30 years ago, a decision was apparently made by staff, some elected officials, or a combination of both to provide benefits including health insurance to part time elected officials who wanted it without ever bringing the matter before city council with proper notice to the community to appear and speak about the proposals.

When it was discovered during the current term, that no formal adoption of compensation for the elected officials occurred other than setting salaries at $12,000 a year for the Mayor and $10,000 a year for each Commissioner, Commissioner Hanson and I tried to end the health insurance benefit, which is substantial and at a very low cost to elected officials. While our vote to do this passed 2-1 with 2 abstentions, the City Attorney provided an opinion that the compensation of an elected official cannot be reduced during his or her term of office. While we argued that the benefit was never properly allowed as shown by the lack of any documentation that it had been and one report in an audit that noted that fact and encouraged a former City Council to correct the error without subsequent action taken by a City Council, the City Attorney provided a formal opinion that the benefits could not be taken away.

At this juncture, the Commissioners need to come to a decision about what the compensation will be for the next City Council, and I am working to try to find some compromise that may make that happen.

The next item on the agenda was Resolution 20-04 that approves a Memorandum of Agreement (MOU) among the Commissioners of Cambridge, the Maryland Department of Housing and Community Development, and the Maryland Historic Trust related to the Pine Street Neighborhood Revitalization activities in the City. On my motion and second by Commissioner Sydnor, the MOU was approved on a vote of 5-0. The purpose of the MOU was to help provide some guidance on how the revitalization efforts can address historic property considerations on work being done on some of the properties in this Historic Area of Cambridge.

Under New Business, Executive Order 2020-01 was introduced. It was the formal declaration of a state of emergency in the City of Cambridge by the Mayor and City Manager as permitted by the City Code and State Law. Given that the Governor had already declared a State of Emergency for the State, this was an easy matter to decide. By making this declaration, this allows the Commissioners to pass emergency legislation that may be required while this emergency lasts. On Commissioner Hanson’s motion and my second, this Declaration of Emergency was passed on a vote of 5-0.

Next was a letter regarding the possible closure of the Coast Guard Station in Oxford. A request for comment had been sent to the City with a required response before our meeting, and the Mayor sent out a letter opposing the closure of the station due to the fact that it would leave Cambridge and the Choptank River area with no Coast Guard protection for a long distance when this area has significant boat traffic. Were the station to be closed, the next closest station would be hours away by boat. To make the letter a formal position of the City, on my motion and second by Commissioner Cannon, we approved the letter and the position it took on a vote of 5-0.

The final matter was a proposal by the City Manager to allocate the approximate $1.2 million that the city has in reserves to make it available for use to offset potential uncollected revenues resulting from the reduction in business activity due to the Covid-19 Virus. As the information provided was confusing to me and others, on my motion and second by Commissioner Cannon, the request was deferred to the next meeting of City Council for a more detailed and consolidated report on what monies are available so that we could consider this matter then. That motion passed 5-0.

The final matter was the motion to permit City Council to have Virtual meetings during this time of emergency as any change in meetings from the location of City Council Chambers is required under section 1-15 a (5) of the City Code. After the motion was read by the City Attorney, I moved, and Commissioner Cannon seconded the motion. It passed on a vote of 4-1 with Commissioner Sydnor voting in the negative.

Commissioner Sydnor during comment time for the Commissioners asked that the reports regarding Covid-19 infection be reported by race and zip code. The Mayor indicated that the Governor had already asked for race to be reported. Commissioner Hanson wanted to know where the one death for Dorchester happened and whether future deaths in the county will be reported. The Mayor indicated that she would make this request to the Collaborative team that is addressing the virus crisis to see what actions they want to take. She will report back to us.

There then was a discussion about food distribution sites in the city and the need to do a Covid-19 flyer to hand out to people to help them understand that they have to stay home, wear masks, and be separated at least 6 feet. The Mayor reported about the need to encourage people to respond to the Census as that will help to bring more resources to the area. She also urged the Commissioners and those watching on their computers to bring positive ideas to her about Cambridge and how we as a community are dealing with this issue. She and Commissioner Foster are seeking to raise money to help provide some of the city residents with a mask, soap, and bleach to use in preventing infection in their homes and families.

At 7:05 p.m. there being no further business to take place, on motion of Commissioner Sydnor and second of Commissioner Cannon, the meeting adjourned.

Thanks for reading. Be safe !!!

Steve