CAMBRIDGE MATTERS # 18

By: Commissioner Steve Rideout

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March 30,2020

The City Council meeting of March 30th was probably the first of its kind in Cambridge. The Mayor and four of the Commissioners, the City Manager, Police Chief, and staff were present at City Council Chambers. I called in and the public was only permitted to call in to the meeting due to the current Covid-19 epidemic and restrictions placed on public meetings by Executive Orders of Governor Hogan.

In preparation for the meeting, City Council Chambers was rearranged so that the community could watch it on the internet through Town Hall Streams that videos the proceedings for viewing on computers and for a record of what took place. As I was not present in City Council Chambers, I may be in error in some of what I provide but will do my best to give you a sense of the meeting as well as what was accomplished.

The meeting began at 6:00 p.m. on the call of the Mayor, who explained to those watching how the meeting would proceed. After the moment of silence and Pledge of Allegiance, the agenda was approved on motion of Commissioner Hanson and second of Commissioner Cannon on a vote of 5-0.

The public was offered the opportunity to call in to make any comments, and time was afforded to allow that to happen. No one did, so the next matter was a request from the public by Veronica Taylor and Sheila Jones that the city provide some funding for the Groove City Culture Fest scheduled for August of this year. Ms. Jones did not call in until later, but the Commissioners agreed on Commissioner Sydnor’s suggestion that this request would be included for discussion when we considered the FY 2021 budget. When Ms. Jones called in later in the meeting, we learned that their request was for $5,000 of city funding.

The Consent Calendar was then taken up and passed on motion of Commissioner Cannon and second of Commissioner Sydnor on a vote of 5-0. The following items were approved:

* The meeting minutes of March 9th
* The Girl Trekkers of Cambridge, MD request to have March 28, 2020 be “We are Harriet Tubman Day” throughout Cambridge. This request had been made prior to the scheduled meeting on March 23rd that was then postponed until the 30th.
* The Dorchester Department of Social Services request to have the corner of Race and Cedar Streets available for a Family Fun Day on October 3, 2020 from 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m.

There being no Ordinances for first or second reading, so the next matters of business were Old Business.

The city manager made his presentation on his proposal to have TMG Group, CPAs be the Contracted Finance Director for the City for the remainder of this fiscal year and for the next two fiscal years. The proposed contractual agreement would allow the city to terminate the contract upon 30 days’ notice. The proposal that was adopted on a 5-0 vote on motion of Commissioner Sydnor that was properly seconded that had them providing services between now and the end of the year for no more than $30,000 depending on when they can start and for $87,000 in fiscal year 2021 and $80,000 in fiscal year 2022.

The next matter was the Reorganization Plan that the City Manager proposed that also included some pay rate changes for some of the staff impacted by the Reorganization Plan. After a lively discussion of the plan and some of its pros and cons, I moved, and Commissioner Hanson seconded the motion to adopt the plan and the pay rate changes he proposed. I felt that this needed to be something that he felt would work best for the city and staff and that if challenges arose in the coming months he could come back and request some changes. Trying to iron out a perfect process now that works best for everyone would be anyone’s guess, and the city manager needed to work out some of the challenges that some of the Commissioners raised. The motion passed on a vote of 3-2 with Commissioner Cannon joining Commissioner Hanson and myself in favor and Commissioners Sydnor and Foster being in opposition.

As part of the Reorganization, the city needed to define the job description of the Public Works Superintendent position. The city manager presented that job description, and after discussion on motion of Commissioner Sydnor and second by Commissioner Hanson, it was approved on a vote of 5-0.

The final matter under Old Business was proposed Resolution 20-02 that would remove the lien that city council voted at the earlier March meeting to place on 507 Race Street. It was intended to protect the city’s interest in trying to recover some of the monies expended to demolish the building when it partially collapsed last summer.

After much discussion among the Commissioners, several motions that failed, and advice by the City Attorney, who indicated that the lien had not yet been placed on the property but that there was an agreement with the owner to cooperate with the city, the city council voted 5-0 on my motion to have the city attorney and/or the Mayor to speak with the Owner of 509 Race Street and the state about the idea of releasing the lien on the condition that the properties at 505, 507, and 509 Race Street once developed only being sold to a for profit business or entity so that these properties, for the first time in a long time, would begin generating taxes for the city and county. A copy of the memo that I prepared to address the proposed Resolution 20-02 is attached for your review. While my proposed motion was not adopted, the intent of the memo and motion was.

We then moved on the New Business and took up three matters together that had to do with funding issues. They were

* The appropriation of $10,000 that was a grant to the police department from Crescent Cities Charities for the purchase of a new K-9 dog
* The appropriation of $326.50 received from the purchase of some old bicycles at Foxwell’s Auction that will go to cover some expenses for the city SWAT van
* The appropriation of $13,841.93 that was received as an insurance payment for the total loss of the police speed camera/trailer to cover the cost of a new speed camera/trailer and 2 years of internet operation.

They were all approved on a vote of 5-0 on motion of Commissioner Hanson and second by Commissioner Cannon

The reappointment of three members of the Board of Appeals and the appointment of a new member where then taken up. Commission members Gaver Nichols, Dormaim Green, and Alternate William Bishop were up for reappointment to terms ending April 23, 2023, and Barbara Knepp was offered for appointment by the Mayor for appointment as a new member for a term to end the same date.

Commissioner Foster raised questions about the appointment and what Ward Ms. Knepp lived in, which was Ward 3. On a motion properly made and seconded and after discussion by the Commissioners, the appointment of Ms. Knepp and the reappointment of Commission Members Nichols, Green, and Alternate Member Bishop were approved on a vote of 3-2 with Commissioners Hanson, Cannon, and myself voting in favor of the appointments and Commissioners Sydnor and Foster voting against.

Grady Wilson on behalf of the tenants of Governor’s Hall asked, according to the agenda, forgiveness of three months of lease payments to the city due to the loss of business and cancellations due to the Covid-19 virus situation. I suggested that before the city forgive the lease payments the tenants should seek compensation from the state based on recent federal legislation intended to address such issue and that in the meantime the city would withhold request for payment. I argued as well that we do not know the length of the governor’s order to close facilities and so the request was premature. On motion of Commissioner Foster and second of Commissioner Sydnor, the request to forgive three months of rent was approved subject to any reimbursement that they might receive from another source on a vote of 4-1 with me being the sole vote in opposition.

The final matter on the agenda was Resolution 20-03 that deals with the hours of work for city employees. It was simply updating the City Employment Manual page 2-13 last approved in 2001 to address changes that had occurred over the years regarding the structure of city government, conform with current administrative practice, and to allow supervisors greater flexibility in scheduling. On motion of Commissioner Hanson with seconds by Commissioner Cannon and Sydnor, the matter was approved on a vote of 5-0.

There was one public comment call in from Grady Wilson at the end of the meeting to indicate to the Mayor and Council that Governor’s Hall would be available in the event it was needed as a medical facility due to the Covid-19 virus challenges that the city and county are facing.

There was also discussion about the need to have the city sign up for Zoom or some other virtual meeting program. The city manager was directed to investigate and sign up for something for a six-month period.

Thanks for reading.

Steve