CAMBRIDGE MATTERS #7

By: Commissioner Steve Rideout

swrideout@aol.com

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The City Council met in Open Session at 5:00 p.m. to go into a Closed Session for several matters permitted under the Open Meetings Act. The Mayor read the purpose for the Closed Session, which then was approved on a vote of 5-0. Later during the open regular meeting of City Council, further action was taken on the matters discussed in the Closed Session. At 6:00 p.m. we began our regular session without having completed all the matters to be considered during the Closed Session so had to go back into Closed Session at the completion of our regular meeting.

Shortly after 6:00 p.m. the Mayor opened the regular City Council meeting and led a moment of silence followed by the Pledge of Allegiance. She then recognized September 19th as “Thank a Police Officer’s Day” and September as Child Cancer Month and the month for Dorchester Goes Purple in recognition of efforts to address drug dependency issue here in the city and county.

On my motion with a second by Commissioner Sydnor, the Agenda was approved 5-0 as presented. During Public Comment Ms. Cephas asked about the Bradford House Citations and how many of them had been addressed and how many were still pending. No one had an immediate answer so the Mayor indicated that someone would be in touch with her to answer her questions. There were no Requests from the Public.

With the Consent Calendar, Commissioner Sydnor asked that item 2a be removed for further discussion. On my motion and second by Commissioner Cannon the following items were approved unanimously:

* The August 24th Meeting Minutes
* The request of Kym Pritchett to have an “End of Summer Community Vendor Day on October 17th from noon to 6:00 p.m. at the corner of Race and Cedar Streets

With Item 2a, Commissioner Sydnor requested that the person making and seconding the motion concerning the letter of support and letter of intent for Delmarva Community Services be identified in the minutes. I indicated that I had made the motion and Commissioner Cannon had made the second. With those clarifications of the September 4th Special Meeting, those minutes were approved unanimously on my motion and Commissioner Sydnor’s second.

The next matter to be taken up was the first reading of Ordinance 1168 – City Mayor and Commissioner Compensation. As you may recall, this matter has been before City Council before with a report from a committee making recommendations regarding compensation for the elected officials that will take office in January 2021.

To give you some context for this ordinance, over 30 years ago, without City Council approval or public notice, the city began allowing part time elected officials to have a benefit of low cost health insurance through the city self-insurance plan. The issue of its legality was raised last year by a citizen that resulted in research to determine what had been done by any prior City Council to authorize the health insurance. The only evidence that could be found was a notation in a city audit report that advised the City Council of the lack of any information that showed that legal steps had been taken by any prior City Council to authorize the insurance and a recommendation that the matter be addressed. No City Council, until the current one, took any action.

As a result, the City Charter was changed recently to allow City Council by Ordinance to establish compensation and benefits for the next and possibly future City Councils.

This is an important issue for the City and for you the taxpayers for several reasons. Cambridge provides self-insurance for its employees of up to $100,000 per employee and $100,000 for a spouse and each child. The city self-insures for health care coverage up to a maximum of $1 million total for all city employees after which a secondary insurance policy takes over. In recent years, the City has regularly exceeded the $1 million cap for the city plan that has caused us to then use the secondary policy.

We fund with our tax payments that $1 million self-insurance fund. For the fulltime employees of the city, this is a significant benefit that compensates to some extent for the somewhat lower salaries that we pay to staff. I believe that by allowing part time elected officials to receive this benefit it provides a potential benefit for them far in excess of what, in my opinion, a part time elected official should be entitled to for his or her service to the city. In addition, the current salary for the Mayor and Commissioners is one of the highest in the state for part time elected officials.

Rather than just receiving the $10,000 salary for a Commissioner or $12,000 for the Mayor, part time elected officials would also have a potential benefit of an additional $100,000 for health care for him or her self as well as an additional $100,000 for a spouse or child. This seems to me to be an excessive benefit for an elected official and an excessive burden on a small community such as Cambridge that has many fiscal challenges.

Understand that I am not opposed to elected officials having health care coverage, but there are other coverages available to them and the public such as the Affordable Care Act, otherwise known as Obamacare, or a health care policy provided by their other employer or retirement benefits. In the past some of our elected officials have chosen to take the city insurance policy because it was better than another policy that was available to them or because it was less expensive than their own policy that was available through work, Medicare, or a spouse.

Another reason that I oppose this benefit for our future elected officials is that the monies that could be used and have been used in the past for city insurance for an elected official or spouse could be used to help increase low full time staff salaries or hire more staff that are needed, for instance, in our police department or code enforcement office. Seeking an elected position as Mayor or Commissioner should be one’s effort to offer themselves for a public service not a way to get benefits that are otherwise available in our society.

The relevant language of Ordinance 1168 to which I object reads as follows:

**(2) In addition to the compensation set forth in Section (1) above, the mayor and commissioners shall be eligible to participate in the City’s health, dental, and life insurance plans during their term in office; provided, however, that any such official participating in such plans shall pay the highest monthly premium contribution for which City employees may be responsible despite the amount of his or her salary set forth in Section (1) (a) above.**

If you agree with me that the above health, dental, and life insurance plans should not be available to our elected officials, you need to let them know by a call or by email at their addresses found on the city website along with a copy to me, so that I can share that information at our meeting on September 28th when this matter will be taken up for a public hearing and vote. You can also participate in the Public Hearing by calling in to the number provided and either speaking or leaving a message on the voicemail if the line is busy.

I am taking a risk here. If you do not let your Commissioner and/or the Mayor know what your view is about this issue, they will be able to say that no one cares and go on to pass this Ordinance with the insurance benefit. Passing it without the insurance benefit is what we should be doing and is what the Compensation Committee recommended. This is too important an issue for you to stay silent. Please speak out.

The next two items that were taken up during our meeting were proposed Transfer Agreements for the Sailwinds Port Property and the Gateway Property. The proposals are that those properties be transferred to CWDI from the City with some limitations that have been placed on them by the State by earlier agreements between the State and the City. These were the two matters that were discussed at the earlier closed meeting.

The reason for the transfer of the Sailwinds Port property is so that CWDI, established to create a better mechanism for the development of the Sailwinds property, could manage the property given to the city by the State based on prior city developed plans in which the citizens participated. That would allow CWDI more easily and effectively to negotiate contracts of sale with potential developers or projects.

The reason for the transfer of the Gateway property, which must remain open land as a welcoming area for the City, is so that CWDI could use it in its efforts to plan, promote, and develop the Port property and the City.

During the discussion regarding the transfer of the two properties and the proposed agreements, several concerns were raised. One was that CWDI needed to be forthcoming to the City about what its plans are for the property and what are the potential projects being considered. Holding a public hearing for the community was suggested. The other main concern was a proposed MOU that would establish how the city would be reimbursed for monies advanced to rebuild the wharf and provide initial funding for CWDI in FY 19 and FY 20. In order that the proposed property transfers take place, they City and CWDI also need to reach agreement on the MOU and how the City will be reimbursed for these and possibly other monies expended on the project.

Based on that conversation and the fact that the city is transferring only the portion of Sailwinds that it currently owns and subject to conditions established by the state, I moved that we approve in concept the proposed transfer agreements subject to some suggestions that I had made to the city attorney as well as subject to ensuring that the document addressed the issue of public access to the portion of the property – the wharf and promenade – that will remain city property as well as CWDI having E and O insurance coverage to protect the city with the future development of the property. The overarching condition for the transfer, however, is the terms of the MOU between the city and CWDI regarding reimbursement of the city for funds advanced and to be advanced.

My motion was seconded by Commissioner Sydnor, who had made a friendly amendment, and passed 3-2 with Commissioner Cannon joining with Commissioner Sydnor and me in the Majority and Commissioners Hansen and Foster being in opposition. From the discussion, it was clear that CWDI needs to take the opportunity before these matters are finalized to reach out to the public for further conversation about its plans.

Next on the Agenda were two additional Old Business matters. The first was the Bayly Road Traffic Speed Reduction Plan. There was a great deal of discussion about what was planned and what was needed or not needed. At the end it appeared that most of the proposal regarding stop signs and signs indicating a stop sign ahead would move forward as well as some clean up needs regarding tree overhangs and brush along the roadway. With those amendments, the plan was approved on a vote of 4-1 on motion of Commissioner Foster and second of Commissioner Cannon. Commissioner Hanson and I joined in the majority and Commissioner Sydnor opposed.

The other matter was the amendment to the Grant Agreement regarding the Franklin Street Boat Ramp. The agreement provided an additional $8,000 for that project and was approved unanimously on motion of Commissioner Sydnor and second by Commissioner Hanson.

With New Business, all the matters were approved on 5-0 votes. They included the following:

* Resolution 20-19 – The suspension of impact fees for properties in the city. Due to the Pandemic, real estate development is slow, and having impact fees inhibits development. The city has waived impact fees for several years in the past as part of its efforts to encourage development. The motion was made by Commissioner Sydnor and seconded by Commissioner Hanson.
* Resolution 20-20 – A Retiree Health Insurance Option. This would provide an incentive to city staff retirees over 62 to agree to move to another plan from the city plan until they reach the age for Medicare at which point they could return to the City Retirement/Medicare Plan. The incentive would be to give the retiree $1,000 to do this. In addition, while their benefit deduction would be higher than the city plan, their prescription benefit would be much greater. If enough retirees agree, the city could save over $100,000 a year. This passed on my motion that was seconded by Commissioner Hanson.
* Declaration of two computers as surplus and assign them to the Empowerment Center. City IT staff was able to piece together two old computers that are no longer of use in the city and want to give them to the Empowerment Center for use by the youth there. This request passed on my motion and second by Commissioner Cannon.
* Declaration of an Uninterruptible Power Supply Unit as surplus and sell it to the city IT director for $5, as it is otherwise unusable. This passed on my motion and second by Commissioner Sydnor.

The final item on the agenda included some requests for the traffic and safety committee to meet to look at speeding problems on Skinners Court and Willowmere Lane as well as some additional places. On the motion of Commissioner Foster and second by Commissioner Cannon and a unanimous vote by the commissioners, the traffic and safety committee will meet to investigate these matters.

With the conclusion of the regular meeting, we then voted to return to a Closed Meeting to discuss the one matter that we were not able to address earlier in the evening. On my motion and second by Commissioner Cannon to go into close session for legal advice, the vote was 4-1. The matter was then discussed in Closed Session and direction was given to the city manager and the city attorney to proceed on its recommendation.

Thanks for reading.

Steve