CAMBRIDGE MATTERS # 4

By: Commissioner Steve Rideout

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With just a few matters on the formal agenda, it appeared that the City Council meeting would be quick and with few or no controversies. That was not to the be case.

The Mayor and all commissioners were present virtually, with the Mayor chairing the meeting from City Council Chambers. After a moment of silence and Pledge of Allegiance, the Mayor asked the Commissioners to approve or amend the agenda.

Commissioner Foster asked to add one matter that was already on the agenda. She also asked that an additional item be added, which involved actions by the Supervisor of Elections that she felt needed to be addressed. She apparently had raised them with him, and he had indicated that it was not necessary for there to be a discussion by City Council. As we are in the midst of the election process with 3 races yet to be determined and two members of City Council being involved in those races, I objected and suggested that the issues be placed on an agenda after the December 1st voting. After discussion, the Mayor agreed, and the matter was not added to the agenda. Commissioner Sydnor asked that a presentation by the police chief be added, which it was. On motion of Commissioner Hanson and second by Commissioner Sydnor, the agenda was amended and approved on a vote of 4-1 with Commissioner Foster in opposition.

Next on the agenda was public comment. Dr. Theresa Stafford raised her concerns about how the votes were accepted during the voting process on October 17th and asked that City Council investigate it. She also was concerned about the Maces Lane MOU issue that had originally been continued over to this meeting with a work session having been set for last Friday. That was cancelled due to the unavailability of representatives of the Maces Lane Community Center organization.

During the Requests from the Public section of the meeting, Gary Gordy and Commissioner Foster made a presentation on the need to have places where some of the City youth can meet and have fun in a structured environment. They suggested the police substation on Pine Street and possibly another police substation. The suggestion was that there be some cooperation with the Police Athletic League (PAL).

Interestingly, it appeared that the Police Chief, the Mayor, and Commissioner Foster had already discussed this idea and agreed to it being started. The idea would be that the program be available on Friday evenings from 6-8 p.m. and that Pizza be provided for the children. Chad Malkus volunteered to contribute to the purchase of the Pizza for a period of time.

The program is planned to start this coming Friday. The Mayor suggested that citizens might be willing to contribute to support the program. For more details on where checks should go and to whom they should be made out, please contact Commissioner Foster or the Mayor.

The next matters on the agenda that were added late came from Cambridge Main Street asking for street closures one night in November and one in December. These requests had not been on the original agenda and notice of them was emailed late in the day to the Commissioners. On Commissioner Hanson’s motion and my second, the matters were defeated on a vote of 3-2 with Commissioners Hanson, Cannon, and me voting in favor and Commissioners Foster and Sydnor in opposition. Under City Council rules, matters that are raised at the last minute and are not on the agenda may only be approved on a vote of 4 commissioners, and Commissioners Sydnor and Foster were not aware of their having been placed on the calendar in the afternoon; so the matters were placed on the next City Council meeting for consideration.

Under New Business, the Police Chief asked that the Commissioners allow him to hire 5 additional police officers for which monies have been budgeted in the current budget. Due to the uncertainty of funds being available due to the Pandemic, a freeze had been put on hiring new officers other than 2 officers that have been selected for training. The Chief needs the additional officers due to the increase in violence here in the city. He indicated that this year there have been 12 shootings that resulted in 3 deaths and an additional16 stabbings.

He has every officer out on the streets, and the strain is telling. With the most recent homicide, he had to ask the Maryland State Police to undertake the investigation due to the limited number of available officers here. He also encouraged the citizens to start using the tip line to help the police in their efforts to reduce and solve crimes. On motion of Commissioner Sydnor and second by Commissioner Foster, the Chief’s request was approved on a vote of 5-0. It was also suggested that he look for additional funding for officers or resources that might be available.

During the comment time for the Commissioners, Commissioner Foster asked that we have a closed session regarding the election process at our next meeting that would be prior to the December voting. This was like her request at the start of the meeting. On her motion and second by Commissioner Sydnor, I objected again and pointed out that this action would be a potential violation of Maryland law and our Ethics Code. Section 16-205 of the Elections Code of Maryland states in part “A person may not interfere with an election official in the performance of the official duties of the election official”. Section 13-2 of the City Code regarding ethics and political conduct states in part “No employee shall directly use or seek to use his official position, authority, or influence to control or modify the political action of any other person, nor shall an employee, during duty hours, engage in any form of political activity other than by casting his own ballot”. The full versions of those code sections are attached. It is not that the matter could not or should not be discussed. It is the timing of that discussion and trying to do it during the election process that I felt was not appropriate.

The apparent issue was “City Workers handling ballots during elections”. On July 13th, the City Council approved a list of Election Judges and alternate judges/poll workers that the Supervisor of Elections needed to help with the election. The city employees who were helping were on a list that was provided to us. Attached is the relevant portion of those minutes (Item 18) that was approved at the July 27th City Council meeting and the list of individuals that was provided to us at the time of that vote.

I argued that the Mayor and Commissioner Sydnor could not be involved in discussion or participation in this matter as the City is in the midst of its election in which they are still candidates. The Mayor agreed and ruled that Commissioner Sydnor could not vote on the matter. The issue of his seconding the motion was not determined. In any event on a roll call vote, the matter was defeated 1-3 as the Mayor did not call on Commissioner Sydnor. He, however, insisted on voting and so the Mayor declared the motion for a closed meeting at our next meeting defeated on a vote of 2-3 with Commissioners Foster and Sydnor in favor of the closed meeting and Commissioners Hanson, Cannon, and me in opposition.

Commissioner Sydnor then raised the issue of the long walk that some citizens had to make to vote at Chesapeake College on Race Street and the need to find a way to accommodate them.

After that final comment and on motion of Commissioner Hanson and second by Commissioner Cannon, the meeting adjourned.

Just 3 more meetings until the new City Council is sworn in.

Do not forget to vote November 3rd in the National and County elections and for city residents on December 1st or by mail for the final decisions in the City Election. Every vote matters.

Thanks for reading.

Steve