CAMBRIDGE MATTERS

By: Commissioner Steve Rideout

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Dear Readers:

The other day I came across my Cambridge Matters from April 10, 2017. Below are excerpts from that Cambridge Matters report that I think are relevant to what follows the excerpts that I am writing today in ***bold italics***. I think that what follows helps us see where we are today and what has been accomplished from where we were 3 ½ years ago. Some is because of City staff and City Council efforts and some is because of the work of others.

From April 10, 2017 –

Yes, Cambridge does matter, and the importance of your engagement in all aspects of this community is critical to its success. Allow me to tell a short story from my past experience that, hopefully, will help set the stage for what follows.

***I have removed the story as it is now not relevant other than to provide an example of the need for the City to have a vision for what we want to accomplish rather than to be reactive to events as they are presented to us. While the latter is necessary, having a vision and anticipating how to address change that is coming is important to Cambridge in so many ways. My hope is that the incoming City Council will collaborate to do that.***

As a community, (my former hometown) stepped up to the challenges we faced and addressed them in cost effective and responsible ways. I see here in Cambridge too few people, businesses, and organizations doing most of the work and contributing most of the financial support for nonprofit efforts. More people need to become engaged in helping to be a solution.

***Over these past 3 ½ years, I have come to see many more people who are working to better our community. People volunteer their time to serve on city committees and commissions. People are volunteering to help children in sports programs or learning to read in school and helping in other ways in the community. WHCP radio and its board and volunteers are doing great work to inform our community. People and organizations are providing financial resources to help nonprofit organizations work more effectively together rather than remain in silos. While Covid-19 has interrupted the ability of our older residents to do one on one in-person volunteering with the children in our community, that opportunity will come again; and we need to step forward to help.***

During the past two weeks since the city manager introduced some possibilities for needed infrastructure improvements for Cambridge as part of a proposed increase in the city tax rate, the drum beat of “do not raise taxes” has been clear and heard. The idea of fixing the 300 block of High Street is no longer part of the proposed budget. The idea of improving substandard housing in Ward 3, which has the most challenges in a city with many housing challenges, is no longer part of the proposed budget.

Have these challenges miraculously been solved? No. Have they fixed themselves? No. Do they continue to exist? Clearly. But your city government is not going to raise your taxes to fix those problems. At least not this year.

At some point, however, the infrastructure in the 300 block of High Street and elsewhere within the city, much of which approximates 100 years, will fail and will need to be replaced. When that happens, those who live here will see their tax rates increase even more than was considered this year. The money to fix all of our infrastructure challenges does not exist in a savings account or reserve fund. Prior city leadership has done what the federal government and many states and localities have done – They have kicked the can down the road for someone else to take care of at a much greater expense. That is what we are doing right now as part of the current budget process.

***Since 2017 we have been able to fix the 300 block of High Street and are in the process, with the help of the State and Habitat Choptank volunteers and city staff, of improving the Pine Street Area Neighborhood; but the city needs to do even more in the future to address ongoing housing issues and code enforcement problems. That means more code enforcement staff and new legislation to give staff more authority to address housing issues. It includes making homeowners and landlords keep their properties in good shape – externally and internally. The Mayor announced the creation of a Housing Task Force several months ago and requested names of candidates from the Commissioners for appointments to the Task Force. We are still waiting for that to be created and appointments made. There are still significant city infrastructure issues that need to be addressed. City Council recently approved a contract to fix the old city hall back roof and authorized the city manager to seek a grant to remove the asbestos and other contaminants from that building. The Long Wharf parking area was improved; and with thanks to The Cambridge Rotary Club, the fountain works again. In addition, the city helped the American Legion procure some state property for their parking area. Cameras were installed in the 2nd Ward and uptown to help deter crime. The City worked with Cambridge Mainstreet to allow Al Fresco dining on Poplar and High Streets during the current Covid-19 crisis.*** ***We are making small steps, but the new City Council needs to develop a vision of addressing current needs such as old and outdated fire trucks that need to be replaced.***

While I was initially in favor of an increase in the tax rate to take care of the two specific items that are high on the city list of priorities, I came to understand a number of things:

1. City Council cannot successfully address the multiple problems that the city faces without bringing the community into the conversation and helping all of you understand what we are facing and obtaining your support for next steps. ***This is a two-way street. I see the interest in government at election time but what about the 4 years in between. Your paying attention at what happens in city committees and commissions and at city council meetings is important. From my view, the Community did become engaged when we had serious matters to be determined by City Council when I asked for help. Demand more from your Commissioner and the Mayor in the way of communication. When they do not respond, let everyone know it.***
2. There are other ways to address some of the infrastructure and service challenges in small bites and at less expense. This will not solve the big problems but will start us on the right path of systematically addressing needs and making improvements. Examples include evaluating the condition of the city streets and prioritizing the most effective and least costly way to fix them. We are going to look at trash collection and recycling services and see if they can be done less expensively. ***It took a while, but we finally evaluated the streets and have in place a report that tells staff and the Commissioners what needs to be fixed and what the priorities should be so we can move toward being proactive and make repairs rather than being reactive and having to replace all of some street asphalt. While we still split the street monies among the wards rather than where they are best spent, it is at least some progress. We moved from a more costly city trash service that included the purchase of expensive trucks and high rates of employee injuries to a private provider. The city and county came together with a second recycling center on Leonard’s Lane that is being used extensively.***
3. City leadership has been unsuccessful in providing the tax payers with a clear picture of what needs to be done while maintaining essential services for the citizens. We need to do better so that you understand what challenges face us, both long standing and new. ***Having public work sessions in which the community can participate and ask questions is what I have seen work in other jurisdictions. We seem to wait until there is a crisis or a problem and then have the work session. I hope the next city council will work to anticipate potential challenges. One that should be high on the list for the coming budget is staff and police salaries.***
4. City leadership needs to help the community understand that past actions by previous city councils have given us low and moderate income housing that, while essential, important and present in every community, does not pay through its taxes or PILOT (Payment in Lieu of Taxes) payments enough money to support the essential citizen services that government provides such as police, emergency, fire, and public education. As a result every other homeowner, property owner, and renter in the city is paying more for their residence because the owners of some multiunit housing are not. ***The 1969 Housing report was quite like the 2019 Housing report. Little or no progress has been made to address the challenges that continue to be found. Greg Boss developed for the Cambridge Association of Neighborhoods (CAN) a data report that provides a picture of what properties in the city, many of which are rental properties, are costing the city and its taxpayers. The incoming city council would be wise to look at that as part of its visioning process.***
5. The city has failed as well to effectively and consistently enforce compliance with the housing maintenance code so that our housing stock has dramatically deteriorated and helped in reducing home values within the city. ***A few years ago, Cambridge was lucky enough to have Susan Webb join city staff and lead the Code Enforcement Division. Her vision and leadership helped make improvements. Unfortunately, we lost her to Dorchester County, but we need to find more code enforcement staff and leadership to pick up where Susan left off.***
6. A tax differential exists between the city and the county. We are looking to see what that differential currently is for Dorchester County and Cambridge and other cities and towns in Dorchester County but also how we compare to the rest of the state. The last time this was done, Cambridge was way out of line compared to other cities in other counties. The tax differential should be based on what services that the city provides that the county does not have to provide. Examples would be police services that the county sheriff does not have to provide in Cambridge. Other services include sewer and water, trash collection, and planning and zoning services all of which the city provides and county does not have to provide. Efforts by former Commissioner Cooke and Commissioner Hanson a couple of years ago to engage the city residents in protesting this tax differential received a widespread yawn by city residents, who apparently could not have cared less. ***Commissioner Hanson and I attempted this year to address this issue once again on behalf of the Cambridge homeowners. We were unsuccessful in our efforts but found more, but not enough, residents who were willing to address this issue with the County Council. Given our lack of success in past years, I do not hold out much hope of any change in the county council position unless the 2022 election can provide a reason for them to address the issue and treat city taxpayers more equitably.***
7. Helping children succeed in school helps everyone. It helps reduce juvenile delinquency and ultimately adult crime. It helps reduce use of illegal substances by youth. It helps teachers be able to teach more effectively and want to stay here to do that work. I have a study from Milwaukee, Wisconsin that shows that that community paid 1/3 more to replace a social worker than it did to retain him/her. If that cost translates to teachers in Dorchester County, just think of the cost we as tax payers are bearing with all of the teachers, who are recruited to come here, stay for a year or so, and leave because of their experiences here. You as a volunteer can help a child and help our collective pocket books by helping out at a local school. ***The County School Board elections will help to make a difference here. With new board leadership and ideas, there is hope. Both Susan Morgan and Mike Diaz will make important contributions to the work of the School Board. Part of the solution, however, rests with all of us to help those youth who are having trouble in their education have some success. Without you, the road to an improved Dorchester County Public Schools, and particularly those schools and students in Cambridge, will be a long one. In addition to school issues for the children of Cambridge, the city also needs to look at the ways that it can support the Maces Lane Community Center initiative as well as a summer jobs program for our youth. That is not just a responsibility of government, it is the responsibility of all of us.***

And the list can go on. What we need from you, at the very least, are good ideas to help solve problems that the city faces and less complaining, which solves little and only helps us kick the can further down the road. ***An example of someone with a good idea is Larry White, who, as a volunteer, undertook the leadership of the city seeking a FEMA grant through the State of Maryland. With Larry’s expertise and efforts and the willingness of city staff and some nonprofit organizations interested in sea water rise concerns to work with him, the City was recently awarded a $187,500 FEMA grant through the State of Maryland to develop a sea water rise plan for Cambridge. The 25% match required will be provided by volunteer and staff services so that there is no cost to the city taxpayer. Once a plan is developed, future grants that may be achieved from FEMA will be funded 90% by the federal government, which will be a significant benefit to the city.***

At our city council meeting on Monday evening, there was a lot on the agenda and much was accomplished. At the same time, much time and effort was wasted. Some would say that that is how democracy works. I would say it happens when city commissioners fail to do their homework and inadequately represent the citizens of this city. ***As you decide on who you will vote for in the coming December 1st elections for the Mayor and Wards 2 and 3, look at past performance by those seeking reelection and with new candidates what they have done up to now in their personal lives to make a difference here in Cambridge.***

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After hearing from citizens regarding the proposed increase in the tax rate and issues concerning the city ethics commission, during which Commissioner \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ sought the resignation of Chuck McFadden from the ethics commission, the agenda was approved. For those of you who do not know Chuck, he was a leader and former chair of the Cambridge Ethics Commission for a number of years and was one of the drafters of the Cambridge Ethics Ordinance that passed city council in 2011. He is and has been for years an advocate for open meetings and ethical behavior for all city employees including elected officials. ….. ***Those in the community who are willing to volunteer and contribute need to be acknowledged for those efforts. At the beginning of the current term, a committee was established to develop a way to recognize the contributions of our citizens. That committee failed in its efforts. Maybe the incoming city council can get that going and establish some mechanism for recognizing the good work that our community volunteers do.***

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Next was the discussion of and approval of a process for screening and awarding Human Services

Grant requests. The city is starting this initiative with a small amount of money this year, but my hope

is that everyone will see the benefit of these grants on our community. This is something that I have

been advocating for years. As an example of how spending money now will help reduce costs later and

improve the quality of life in Cambridge, my experience has shown me that investing in early childhood education and

parental engagement and mentoring programs for older youth will have a positive impact on school readiness, reduction

of substance abuse, juvenile delinquency and ultimately adult crime and the cost of incarceration.

I have seen direct correlation with programs such as this improving school systems, helping to retain

good teachers, improving academic achievement, and reduction of crime and delinquency. If we do not

engage in some of these programs, the hope for a better Cambridge will never be achieved, and tax

rates will never go down. ***If we are going to spend our taxpayer money effectively, this is where***

***some of our first dollars and not our last dollars should go. While the funds mentioned above were provided in***

***the FY 2018 budget, none have been provided since then.***

Under new business the Commissioners received and adopted the 2018 proposed budget adoption

schedule and the 2018-2022 Five-Year Capital Improvement Plan. City staff also sought permission to

issue an RFP for Privatization of City Sanitation Services, which was approved by City Council. ***As part***

***of any budget work session for the incoming city council, it needs to undertake a review of what***

***has been accomplished as well as where the city stands on the matters that have not yet been***

***addressed. This is an important part of the visioning process that must be undertaken to keep***

***Cambridge moving forward. The work session needs to have an ability for the public to***

***Participate and not just observe.***

…

The city council approved the ownership interest transfer of a portion of Cambridge Commons, a low

and moderate income housing project here in the city. The city manager also announced that staff will

be providing at least annual and possibly semi-annual reports to city council about this and the other

subsidized housing projects in the city to help city council and city residents understand the ongoing

status of those projects and their cost. ***I do not remember ever receiving any of these reports. This***

***should be another matter for the new City Council to pick up and require information on to***

***support the work of council in the future.***

Another item of business was the approval of a contract for seawall improvement design for Choptank

and West End Avenues and Willis and Oakley Streets. I raised the issue of the need to address

Belvedere Street as well and was advised that city staff believed that information gained from the

contract will help staff to address Belvedere Street improvements as well in overall corrective efforts.

***The city was successful in the grant request for the state monies to address some of these***

***streets, and I understand that the city is working on proposals for approval by the Maryland***

***Department of Environment in anticipation of finding the right company to do the work.***

***But let’s also talk about other things that have happened or are happening that are not mentioned above:***

1. ***Creation of CWDI to help with the development of Sailwinds and the hard work of its volunteer Executive Director and Board***
2. ***The MOU with the county and Shore Health about the remaining Sailwinds property***
3. ***Cambridge Marketplace, thanks to Charlie and Hunter Fairchild – including the Shore Health Emergency Room and Medical building, the Goodwill Store, and new food outlets***
4. ***The redevelopment of the Metro Building at Dorchester Square thanks to Charlie and Hunter Fairchild***
5. ***The impending redevelopment of Building F on Dorchester Avenue as well as the adjoining city park***
6. ***Ending health, dental, and life insurance benefits for elected officials that had never been legally authorized by any City Council***
7. ***The work being undertaken by the J2W Foundation to help address critical educational needs for children in our community***
8. ***Increasing interest in Cambridge by home buyers from outside the community***
9. ***Increasing repair and renovation of properties in the historic district***
10. ***The Delmarva Community Services (DCS) 61 unit low and moderate housing building for the elderly that is being built***
11. ***The arrival of the Culta Marijuana dispensary outlet***
12. ***The Days of Resilience #1 and #2***
13. ***Progress on rehabilitation of downtown properties on Race Street***

***And where has there been no or little progress? The two properties that come immediately to mind are the Hearn Building on Race Street and the Mill Street School.***

***Thanks for reading.***

***Steve***