CAMBRIDGE MATTERS - 2021-02

 Stephen W. Rideout

swrideout@aol.com

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Dear Readers:

Since leaving the City Council in January, I have been busy with several projects that include coordinating the Covid-19 vaccination process for my wife and me, which has been successfully completed. For those trying to sign up, I see that it can be at times a frustrating and difficult process.

Over the last couple of months, I have seen several issues relating to Dorchester County that raise concerns that I have tried to investigate. I reached out to two of the members of County Council to discuss my concerns but never heard back from either of them. I read newspaper articles about the recent departures of the County Manager, Emergency Management Director, and the head of the Recreation Department.

When I was on City Council, I was aware of the departure of another County Manager, a Planning Director, and another Emergency Management Director I thought were doing great jobs and worked well with the City. Sometime during my term, the County Council, for reasons still unknown to me, terminated a monthly meeting of representatives of The City and County Councils aimed at issues of mutual concern. I also understand that as part of our City Election process, the city was assured that the County would use some of the Covid-19 Federal Funding directed to them to help support that effort and then changed their mind and declined to do so on direction of a majority of the County Council. Finally, during my time on City Council, Robbie Hanson and I made efforts to help City homeowners obtain a better break on our County Taxes by improving our Tax Differential through the County Council.

I have heard nothing about the efforts of County Council to find new administrative leadership but hope that has started and is progressing well. At the same time, the departure of top administrative staff and other issues related to the city relationship with the county raise concerns about how our County Government is being run by those elected to represent us. So, I have begun some digging.

Under Sections 405 and 406 of the County Charter, we learn about the County Council-County Manager form of government. Copies of the two sections are attached.

Under Section 405, the language appears to indicate that a majority of the County Council can appoint and fire the County Manager and that he or she “shall serve at the pleasure of the Council”. That means that 3 of the 5 members can decide who to appoint and 3 or more can decide when the County Manager’s employment ends.

At first blush, one might think that would be fine. The challenge for county residents is that it creates a situation where the 3 people who appointed the County Manger in effect control that person’s professional judgment on administrative actions that s/he takes in trying to run the County government, so that the County Manager is more of an administrator, who does what s/he is told, and less of a manager.

The County Manger may “except as may be otherwise provided in the Charter, hire, suspend, and remove all heads of departments, agencies, and departments, subject to the approval of Council.” That means if a department or agency head has the backing of a majority of the members of the Council for any reason, the County Manger has no control over a lower department or agency head no matter how poorly the person performs or whether that person may be placing the county in financial jeopardy by his or her behavior.

One way that the citizens of Dorchester County can do anything about the above is every 4 years at election time. During the period between elections, however, we are stuck with decisions both good and bad, both policy and administrative, that the County Council is making. As I am sure you are aware, many of the important decisions being made this term have been 3-2, and the majority seems to always be the same three people. One of the most important to our citizens, I think, is that the County Council refuses to have their meetings shared over the internet or television as the City of Cambridge does.

Another way to help change, and I think improve, the way that county government works is to give the County Manager greater authority to run the day-to-day operations of the county that does not require the approval or consent of a majority of County Council. To make the changes that would be needed, however, the County Charter would need to be changed. That can only happen under Maryland Law for counties by a referendum process that takes time and effort by a lot of people.

I may be the only person that sees problems and challenges with the current County Charter and a more efficient and effective County Government that would be more open and transparent for all of us but I would like to see if I am alone. If you think things are fine, you do not need to contact me.

If you think that things could be improved and that you would like to join with others to talk about what might be done, I would welcome your contacting me at swrideout@aol.com. If there are people from every election district and there are enough of you interested in making changes about which there is agreement and then working to collect the signatures needed to place proposed Charter Changes on the ballot for a vote, I would be happy to work to see what might be accomplished.

If/when I have enough people interested in all the 5 election districts, I will be in touch. If you know someone who might not otherwise see this but think that they might be interested, please share this with them.

Thanks for Reading.

Steve Rideout