CAMBRIDGE MATTERS - 2021-04

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May 27, 2021

This past Wednesday I was able to attend a meeting of the Cambridge Shoreline Resilience Plan Project Team that has been established by the Cambridge City Council to anticipate and plan for the impact of sea level rise here as well as ways to reduce damage to public and private properties in the city due to nuisance flooding and future storm damage. This meeting included a site visit by the Project Team and Steering Committee that includes representatives of a variety of state and federal agencies, non-profits, and individual consultants to see what challenges face the city currently and, in the future, and to provide input to the project team on steps the city may want to take to address some of those challenges.

The Project Team was created through a grant from the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA) through the Maryland Emergency Management Administration (MEMA). It has created a website that can provide you with a great deal of information and updates on the work of the group. The website for this project is excellent and informative and can be found at <https://www.makecambridgeresilient.org/>

The City’s project management for this grant has hired Michael Baker International as its technical support contractor for the first phase of this effort. Baker describes itself as “a leading provider of engineering and consulting services, including design, planning, architectural, environmental, construction and program management … has been solving some of the world’s most complex infrastructure challenges for more than 80 years with a legacy of expertise, experience, innovation and integrity.”

The meeting started with a presentation by Kristen Fidler, Director of Harbor Development for the Maryland Department of Transportation. She provided some remarkably interesting detail on what the state has to do every year to help ensure that the main channel of the Chesapeake Bay Navigation System remains at a depth of 50 feet in order to ensure the Port of Baltimore remains available to the large oceangoing ships that provide resources and products to the Mid-Atlantic and jobs here in Maryland.

As a result of the dredging that the state does to maintain the deep channel, Maryland is able to attract international investment in port-related business. Without it, this business would go away. A portion of the dredged material is currently being used to restore Poplar Island with an anticipated completion date of around 2032. Currently in the planning stages for the Mid-Bay area of the Chesapeake Bay are the Barren Island and James Island restoration projects that were authorized in 2014 through a cost sharing agreement between the federal government and the State of Maryland.

The purpose of this presentation was to show what might be the possibilities for more local dredging in the Choptank or elsewhere close by to examine whether reclaiming Rooster Island that is immediately offshore of the Gerry Boyle Park at Great Marsh might be possible and by doing so helping to address some of the potential flooding challenges here in Cambridge.

During the site visit, the group was taken to Gerry Boyle Park at Great Marsh, the deteriorated flood wall at Oakley Street, The Cambridge Yacht Club and City Marina, and Sailwinds/Cambridge Creek in order to see the different issues present and what damage has already been done at those locations.

The project is in its early stages with lots of data collection and assessing the risks of sea level rise, nuisance flooding, and potential storm damage in each of the areas visited. Michael Baker International staff have done what they call Bathtub Modeling and Analysis at these different locations as part of this learning process, and there are plans to perform surveys of residents who are living in the different areas and users of those areas as well as holding community meetings to have conversations with those most impacted by the current flooding problems.

Decisions about what might be the best and the most cost-effective responses will not be made without a thorough vetting of each possibility with the state and federal agencies that are knowledgeable about these issues and would be the potential funders, along with the city, for any next steps.

The website that I mentioned above will be routinely updated as new information is developed, so please be sure to check it periodically.

Thanks for reading.

Steve