CAMBRIDGE MATTERS - 2021-09

 Stephen Rideout

swrideout@aol.com

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For a small town on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, this past week was busy with good things, bad things, and very bad things happening. It was like we were being drawn into the maelstrom of the larger world before we knew it and before we could do anything about it.

One good thing that happened occurred early in the week at a meeting held by the Maryland Department of the Environment (MDE) at the Linkwood Firehouse. The purpose of the meeting was to obtain public comment about a plan by Valley Proteins to expand the amount of its rendering plant discharge into the Transquaking River. Before any changes to their discharge permit, Maryland law requires a public hearing. The current permit has been administratively continued for close to 15 years despite non-compliance by Valley Proteins with the requirements of the current permit.

The good news is that close to one hundred citizens attended the meeting and almost half of them spoke. They came from all walks of life, political persuasions, and locations in and outside of Dorchester County. They also spoke eloquently with one voice about the proposed discharge permit and the past failure of Valley Proteins to meet the prior requirements of the current permit and the failure of MDE to hold them accountable for their violations.

From the many speakers, a number of things were constant:

1. MDE is a silo and is little able to address the complex interplay of water, soil, and air data that establishes a clear picture of the pollution that is taking place in our environment. Some of those areas are dealt with by other Maryland regulatory agencies that have inadequate interaction and collaboration with MDE. The agency is challenged to make a science-informed assessment of whether the permit should be issued as drafted or modified to address how Valley Proteins has been allowed to pollute the Transquaking and would increase that pollution if granted a permit that allowed for increased discharge.
2. Before a new permit is issued, the state regulatory framework that is supposed to address the water, soil, and air pollution issues must create a collaborative workgroup that will ensure adequate collection of water, soil and air samples on a timely basis, contemporaneous testing of those samples and sharing of outcomes, and timely collaborative responses to the findings that are made.
3. In the lifetime of many who spoke, the Transquaking has changed from a pristine and vibrant river with many varieties of fish into a polluted river in which only a few varieties of the least desirable fish can survive.

MDE will be making its decision on the permit application in the coming months and public comment in writing will be allowed through 5 p.m. December 15, 2021, at Maryland Dept. of the Environment, Water and Science Administration, 1800 Washington Blvd., Suite 455, Baltimore, MD 21230-1708 or Email to

Michael.Richardson@Maryland.gov

Expressing you’re your opinion could help save the Transquaking from further damage and might help to bring it back to life. Areas of concern that you might address include the following:

1. Not allowing any higher discharge at least until Valley Proteins maintains a clean track record of compliance with the current or new permit at the current discharge level.
2. MDE and the other state agencies working collaboratively on all of the pollution issues.
3. The current watershed study called the TMDL needing to be redone in a comprehensive fashion to help protect and save the river.
4. Valley Protein’s contribution to the declining environmental health in the watershed being widespread in addition to the plant discharge into the Transquaking – Air pollution from the plant itself, drawdown of public groundwater aquafers as it uses additional fresh water, further contamination of the air and groundwater in the Nanticoke watershed through the use of the largely unregulated industrial sludge created by the plant and distributed as farm fertilizer.

The bad news came the next day when the Mayor of Cambridge was arrested on an indictment charging fifty counts of what is called “Revenge Porn” for allegedly posting photographs with inappropriate comments on social media without the permission of the person photographed. City Council met quickly and appropriately sought his resignation, which to date he has declined to do. It appears that failing a resignation, the City Council is prepared to move forward under the City Charter to seek his removal. The relevant language from the Charter reads as follows:

Sec. 3-35. - Removals from office; cause, procedure.

The c**ommissioners may remove from office,** or discharge from employment, the city manager, the chief bailiff and **any other officer** or employee **that may be elected** or appointed under the authority of the charter, or any ordinance or order of the commissioner (whether be the term of service under which he holds his office or employment), for neglect of duty, for incompetence, **or for any other misconduct, which, in the judgment of the commissioners, constitute reasonable and sufficient ground for removing him from office,** or depriving him of employment. **In all cases, where the official** or employee **has any fixed or definite term of service, a charge or complaint, in writing, shall be presented to him, and evidence as to the facts alleged in such charge or complaint, shall be taken before the commissioners if he denies the correctness or truth of same.** But, where the delinquent holds his employment, at the will of the commissioner, they may discharge him, with or without formal charge or hearing, if they consider it just, right or expedient thus to do.

It is hoped that the mayor will do what is in the best interest of the City of Cambridge and its residents and resign. If not done quickly, City Council will, hopefully, undertake action as they have stated that they intend to do.

While the situation with the mayor was bringing much attention and public comment and speculation, Friday brought even more disheartening and tragic news – the death of another African American young man, a teenager.

This is not the first time this year that someone has been killed here in Cambridge or wounded as a result of shootings. In a town that has had very few killings in past years, 2021 has become very disturbing and difficult year due to the dramatic increase in these events and the tragic loss of too many young lives.

Cambridge police and Maryland State police are doing what it appears they can to find and prosecute the perpetrators, but the killings continue without the kind of community response that resulted from the mayor’s arrest. For months, efforts have been and continue to be underway to provide resources for the youth of Cambridge through programming at the Boys and Girls Club, the YMCA, the Empowerment Center, New Beginnings Youth and Family Center, and other programs, but our city council, county council, community, and our school system need to step forward with money, mentors, programs, and ideas to help the children of Cambridge and Dorchester County have a better chance of becoming strong, educated, and productive adults. We owe them nothing less.

Thanks for reading.

Steve