CAMBRIDGE MATTERS – 2022-04

 Judge Stephen Rideout (ret.)

swrideout@aol.com

About a year ago I wrote a Cambridge Matters about the high turnover of county government staff and lack of transparency in our county government. I asked if others had seen what I thought I was seeing and asked if anyone was willing to come together to see what might be done.

The number of responses to that Cambridge Matters was overwhelming. Other people from across the County and across the political spectrum had seen what I was seeing and wanted to do something to make our county government work better. Over the past 12 months, this group has worked together to develop two proposed Charter Change Petitions that will need to be approved by approximately 5,000 registered voters each in order for us to place these petitions on the November 2022 ballot.

In future articles I will provide you with the petitions and with some of the questions that we have been asked and our answers. Today’s Cambridge Matters, however, is intended to give you background and a brief summary of why these petitions are being offered for consideration, signature, and vote in November.

First there was the research and discussion amongst the group that was to help us decide what was the best course of action. We looked at the current charter and its language and places where we thought changes could be made. We also looked at what we felt were the most critical issues that need to be addressed. The decision was made to move forward with two petitions. One is about transparency of county government and the other is about how the County Manager position is chosen and how it can better run the day-to-day operations of the county. There are other issues, that I will discuss in a future Cambridge Matters.

Next, we looked at what the law requires for citizens to get the petitions we were considering approved within the requirements of the law. We found that this is not an easy process and one that places a significant burden on the public to ensure compliance with the Maryland Constitution and Law. Out of that research came the Dorchester Citizens for Better Government, which is registered with the State Elections Board. We have a President/Chair and Treasurer, as required by the law and the ability to raise money for this effort so long as we file reports on monies raised and spent with the State Elections Board. Allen Nelson is our President/Chair and Ted Brooks is our Treasurer.

We hired a lawyer who is well versed in this kind of work to draft the proposed Charter changes. We then presented them to our local elections board for review and approval as to the form required by the law. The Director of the Dorchester Elections Board and their lawyer were given copies of the proposed petitions, and we have received a letter from their director acknowledging that the petitions meet the requirements as to form.

The Dorchester Citizens for Better Government is a non-partisan collaboration of residents of Dorchester County that are proposing these charter amendments principally to address the two problems mentioned above in the way the County Council conducts its business and chooses to govern.

The first issue that we see that needs to be addressed is:

1. Transparency and Full Disclosure-
2. The proposed Charter Section 606 mandates that the County Council implement solutions to increase the ease by which citizens can participate in and understand more fully the Council decision-making process.
3. It requires County Council meetings to be on live CATV or live streamed on the internet.
4. It requires the Council to provide to the public the non-confidential documents that the County Council members receive that support the agenda items prior to Council meetings.

The Council has voted down at least three requests to have meetings shown on TV or over the internet. The reported reasoning for these votes that I understand were 3-2 votes is that people can come to participate in the meetings in person or listen to them over the phone. Due to the size of the county, our group felt that making people drive long distances to the meetings at a cost to them is not reasonable. This was especially true during this time of Covid-19 where the County Council often met virtually. We are advised that there is already the equipment available in Council Chambers to show the meetings. In addition, listening over the phone is inadequate since the Council Members do not always identify who is speaking and phone connections are not always good.

In addition, the County Council several months ago was found to have violated the MD Open Meetings Act in their handling and reporting of closed sessions. The ability to develop the evidence to support the complaints about these violations was difficult to obtain given how meetings are currently conducted.

With regard to the need for non-confidential supporting documents that are already provided to the Council Members, we only know from the agenda what the topic will be, sometimes in broad terms, but currently are provided no details that would help in understanding the issue or problem and how it might impact us individually or as a community.

As the issue of the County Manager position is more complicated and our proposed solutions are more detailed, I will leave it to my next Cambridge Matter to address this important issue and some other matters related to the County Charter.

Thanks for reading.

Steve