CAMBRIDGE MATTERS – November 13, 2022

Mayor Stephen Rideout

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Earlier this year the City Council agreed to hire former Chief Melvin Russell as a consultant to help Chief Todd and the city undertake a community policing effort. Community Policing is not a simple process and has many interconnected parts that have to work effectively together in order to make it successful. It is an idea that I think is well worth the expense and effort to undertake.

The city currently protects the community with a police force that is at least 10 officers short of its authorized numbers. It does it with a new work schedule put in place by Chief Todd to help address the challenges that our police department and our community face with this reduced staff. It does it while understanding that increasing the number of police officers is not the sole answer to our challenges here and is not an easy thing to do with all of the competition among cities and counties on the Eastern Shore and elsewhere to hire good officers.

While Chief Russell is in the process of learning about our police force, our community, and its history and needs, a proposed youth curfew ordinance has been placed on the November 14th city council agenda for first reading. Most often this kind of legislation is intended address concerns about how late some younger children are staying out at night, who they are hanging out with, and the danger that they place themselves in by not being at home. While curfew legislation is often well intentioned, it should not be considered until all other options have been discussed and some tried to address the concerns. I believe that, if passed, it will create unintended consequences that have not been fully considered or vetted by the community.

Our police department has not been given the opportunity to consider options that it might implement to address the issue. Chief Russell has not been allowed to provide his views on how the curfew initiative would impact one of the reasons he has been brought here – how to implement community policing. In addition, the city’s youth, to my knowledge, and our community as a whole have not been given a voice in what they feel are needed to address the concerns or what they think about a curfew.

From my past experience and recent conversations with people here who are knowledgeable about children’s issues, implementing a curfew law, even if it is for a limited period of time, can negatively impact the effort to bring community policing to Cambridge and can give the community a false impression that the curfew will be the solution for our community. A curfew is not the answer. Providing programs and resources for the youth of our community to give them alternatives to being out in the community in dangerous places with dangerous people is a better answer. Giving our police department the opportunity to consider options that exist before thinking that a law change will be the answer should be one of our first steps.

A curfew is one more way for government to take away from parents the right and responsibility to raise their children. I cannot believe that the parents of the children who are out late agree with their staying out late. My experience has been that it is more about the parents or custodians having lost control in their home and their needing help to address their concerns and ours. The solution is not punishing parents. It is about helping them and their children to find solutions for their home. A curfew statute is one more way to avoid the expense to the city of providing programs or funding programs through existing organizations or ones to be formed. It is not. State , federal, and foundation funding is available to help with effective programming.

Most judges that I knew and know are often concerned when state legislatures come into session because of the legislation that may result without a full investigation of the cost, the problems the legislation is intended to address, and the consequences, intended and unintended, of the legislation. If this effort to propose curfew legislation for Cambridge continues, before considering it, we need to have a community conversation about it and what alternatives exist. We are doing it for traffic calming and speed reduction . We are doing it for proposed residential utility rate increases. See the agenda for Monday’s City Council meeting. We have done it for consideration of community concerns regarding Pine Street Area development and for specific pieces of property that the city has bought. Are these issues more important than the children of Cambridge? Should we not have community input so that City Council can make its best decisions on what is in the best interest of the children and families of our community and the community as a whole?

A few of the concerns that I have and that people have expressed to me include the following:

* With a reduced number of police officers, will the officers be distracted from crime prevention and response by having to address curfew matters?
* Will some in the community see the police stopping youth as harassment rather than a good intentioned effort to enforce the curfew ordinance?
* How will the drug dealers and local criminals use the curfew against the police and the city to convince the youth that their rights are being taken away from them for no valid reason?
* As the curfew is age related, how will the officers know what is the age of the child they have stopped to question if the child has no identification or refuses to give the officer any information? Will the curfew times set by the city undermine a parent’s efforts to have children home earlier than the curfew requires?
* If the child is not cooperative about going home (and there could be good reasons for that), the proposed ordinance directs that they be taken to the police department until a parent can be located. What will the cost be to have people seven days a week available to monitor the children detained?
* How will the curfew ordinance impact the community policing effort to build positive community relations if the police are stopping youth who are doing nothing wrong other than possibly being out beyond a certain hour?
* Would not the city and grant resources be put to better use by the police department hiring 2-3 civilians to work in the community to address some of the concerns that are prompting this idea of curfew legislation? Or funding a nonprofit of trusted residents to do it?
* The city budget has funded the 10 officer positions that we do not have and probably won’t be able to hire for years. Why not use some of that money to hire citizens to run the Police Athletic League (PAL) program and other community outreach events that Sgt. Patton and others have planned? They could also be the people that reach out to parents whose children have been seen as being out too late and work with the family to address the issues that may be present.
* For city children, since the County has done little to fund after-school and weekend programs, is it not the responsibility of city government and local nonprofits to address these issues?

As part of my campaign for Mayor, crime and children were the two main issues that I told the voters I planned to address. This is our first opportunity to do so, even if the curfew legislation is not introduced. I will be holding a Mayor’s Forum on November 28th at 6:00 p.m. at city council chambers so that the community, our youth, representatives of child serving agencies and nonprofits, and possibly Chief Russell and our police chief can tell us about what they might address these issues and find solutions that positively impact the lives of our children and our community. As I develop this event further, I will provide more details on how it can give everyone the opportunity to participate.

Thanks for Reading.

Steve