*Submitted by Jim Brady*

**Special Meeting**

In a special session Monday, the Cambridge City Council discussed – but took no action on – potential changes to the city charter in light of controversies around commissioners who have moved out of their wards and continue to serve on the council.

One of the issues was special elections that would need to be held to replace commissioners or the mayor who would become ineligible or resign from office. The council discussed using the county Board of Elections versus private firms.

“If we have the Board of Elections willing to do it, that makes sense,” said Commissioner Jameson Harrington.

Several council members said they were displeased by the low turnout for city elections.

Mayor Steve Rideout suggested that someone other than the city manager serve as election judge so that the burden of conducting an election would not interfere with city operations.

Commissioner Chad Malkus said it was important to keep city elections separate from federal elections.

To avoid the expense of run-off elections, the council considered changing the requirement that a winner needs a majority, but rather, a plurality to win. Another point in that discussion was the possibility of using ranked-choice voting to eliminate the need for run-off races. Commissioner Roche said Takoma Park uses that system, and supported using it in Cambridge.

City Manager Tom Carroll pointed out that in most cities, a majority is not required, but simply, whoever gets the most votes wins.

The council also discussed what is at the heart of the controversy in the current situation: within-ward residency requirements for commissioners. Currently, a candidate for City Council needs to reside for at least six months in the ward where he or she is running.

While they did not offer any solutions in the special session for their current predicament triggered by Commissioners Malkus and Commissioner Roche moving out of their respective wards, the council pondered changes to the city charter that might alleviate such situations in future councils.

Carroll pointed out that most cities appoint a replacement rather than hold an election for vacancies caused by commissioners who move or otherwise leave office before their term expires.

Commissioner Malkus suggested that residents of a ward might be required to petition to hold a special election, otherwise council could appoint replacements. Commissioner Spuddy Cephas said it needs to be clarified whether a council member serves until replaced or at the expiration of the grace period commissioners have for moving back into the ward they leave.

In public comments, Dorothy Drahzal said the new board of elections should be given a chance to come up with solutions, and advocated ranked-choice voting in city elections. Jim Sicks decried “this notion of flexibility” that the current city council is taking with the rules set forth in the charter, and urged the council to consider the 1987 lawsuit that dictated the wards and requirements for voting in elections and serving in office.

**Regular Meeting**

A contingent of West End residents prevailed in their opposition to zoning changes for the Mill Street school property when the City Council voted down the amendment Monday night.

The proposed changes would have extended the development's units as rentals indefinitely, running against an agreement the neighbors had with the city in 2021. The measure was voted down unanimously after a succession of residents voiced their frustration in public comments.

“This overlay was not our first choice,” said Rick Klepfer, referring to the 2021 agreement. “Now the property owner wants to change it again” to eliminate the requirement that the apartments to be built would convert to condominiums. “We have only one shot at this.”

“We were kept in the dark,” said Pete Doyle. He said the Planning and Zoning Commission was working with the developer while local residents were uninformed of the change to allow apartment rentals indefinitely.

Several residents pointed out that they all support the redevelopment of the dilapidated school property. What they objected to was the change from the requirement that the buildings would convert to condominiums after a period where the property would qualify for historic tax credits.

“Everyone who lives in the neighborhood wants the school developed,” said Kathy Ridgely, a Mill Street resident. “We just want it done. I don't think apartments are the right answer.”

In other actions, the Mayor and City Council heard Assistant City Manager Brandon Hesson take the oath of office, listened to Shannon Hannawald of Endo Warriors of the Eastern Shore plea for greater awareness of endometriosis, and approved meeting minutes for Feb. 13.

The council also declared March 31 as Transgender Day of Visibility in Cambridge and approved a Memorial Day ceremony for May 29 from 10 am to 1 pm at Long Wharf Park.

In a first reading City Planner Pat Escher described a parcel of land at 625 Wells Street intended for bioretention. The acquisition from Habitat for Humanity Choptank Inc would not require any funds.

In new business, the council approved unanimously a resolution to establish policy goals for themselves. They also heard and supported a proposed Portia Johnson-Ennels Internship program that would place 10 interns aged 16-22 in the city's IT, engineering, public works, police and fire-rescue departments.

Commissioner Brain Roche also brought up his opposition to the apartment plan for the Hearn Building on Race Street, saying it would concentrate poverty in the downtown area. Commissioner Spuddy Cephas countered that there was a desperate need for workforce housing. Commissioner Chad Malkus said the project was overdue to remove the unsightly building supports, and said the council should demand they be removed. City Manager Tom Carroll said that while a warning letter sent to the property owners got their attention to discuss the matter, they have since been unresponsive.