CAMBRIDGE MATTERS – April 2023

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You may recall the petition initiative for changing the County Charter that was started last spring by the Dorchester Citizens for Better Government and wonder what happened to it. I hope that what follows will help you understand what we were able to do and not do and what I understand will be happening in the near future.

With the Petition effort, we sought to gather over 5,000 signatures prior to the 2022 November elections in order to have two changes to the County Charter placed on that ballot that we felt were important. They involved sections 405-406 of the County Charter related to the County Manager position and a new section 606 that addressed government transparency.

We had started this effort in the fall of 2021 by gathering a group of people that supported the idea of making some changes to the County Charter, meeting to discuss possible changes, and finally hiring a lawyer to help draft the changes that the group agreed upon. The changes we proposed are attached. With the help of many people at church events, farmers’ markets, and fire houses we collected signatures of registered voters.

During our research of the County Charter, we learned that the County Council should have appointed a Charter Commission in 2021 but did not finally approve all of the members of that body until May of 2022. The intention of the majority of County Council was to have a report and recommendations by the Commission by July 2022. That gave the Commission members two-three months to do their research and make their recommendations. Under the law, the Commission should have had at least a year to do their work.

During the Spring of 2022 and time that the Charter Commission did their work, the Citizens for Better Government made presentations to community groups about our effort, collected signatures on the petitions, and attended the Charter Commission meetings where we were able to suggest ideas for consideration. In the end, after meeting and making recommendations to the County Council, the County Council declined to adopt any of the Commission’s recommendations for placement of Charter revisions on the ballot for the November 2022 vote.

Despite our efforts to collect the required number of signatures, we were only able to collect about 1,300 signatures for each petition, but that was not enough; so, we felt that our next best option was to support the efforts of the Charter Commission, which we did, for the most part. When the Commission failed to receive the vote of County Council, we realized that our hope to place any issues on the 2022 ballot was not going to be successful. We then decided to wait for the November election to see what those results would be in order to have a new council that might support some of our ideas.

We were successful in one respect, which was the former council agreeing to place the council meetings for viewing by the public on town hall streams. In addition, the new County Council has hired Jeff Powell as the Acting County Manager, which is already paying dividends toward making the progress we anticipated. As some members of the former council and candidates for election had signed our petitions, we knew that with a new County Council there was the possibility that it would restart the Charter Commission to allow it to reconsider past recommendations and offer any new ideas that might be brought forward.

That is now happening. The County Council is in the process of appointing a new Charter Commission that may have some of its former members reappointed. When they start meeting, the Dorchester Citizens for Better Government will be present supporting their efforts to help improve how our county government can run and to give to the citizens of Dorchester County the opportunity to vote in the November 2024 election on proposed changes to the County Charter that will, hopefully, provide for a better and more efficient and effective government.

Thanks for reading.

Steve