CAN Meeting Minutes, 4/20/2023, submitted by Judd Vickers, held at the Dorchester County YMCA @ 201 Talbot Avenue, Cambridge.

Chuck McFadden, President called the meeting to order at 6:30 pm, and there was a quorum of Board Members present, including Roman Jesien, Judd Vickers, Jane Weeks, Dave Thatcher, Rick Klepfer & Brad Rice.  The meeting was well attended, with over 35 individuals in attendance, the vast majority identified themselves as YMCA members.  First Ward Commission Brian Roche was in attendance, as well as Joy Staniforth, who was instrumental in the early years of the YMCA in the 1990s.  Joy indicated the YMCA had its beginnings in Dorchester in the late 1980s.

Prior meeting minutes approved and Treasurer reported $3,860.67 in funds.  Chuck highlighted there are now 487 members, with CAN expanding and gaining members in some of the newer areas of the City, and suburban areas just outside of the City.  We are always seeking support and Board members from different parts of the City.  Membership is free and we will accept donations.  New focus around Group Homes and Short-Term Rental/Boarding House type uses that are moving into neighborhoods and causing a variety of issues throughout the City.  Contact Judd Vickers regarding housing quality related matters.  CAN may consider utilizing funding to obtain legal guidance on certain housing matters in the future.

Judd Vickers introduced Shania Gregory and Robbie Gill.  Shania has been with the Dorchester County YMCA for 4 years as the Facility Director.  Shania has over 11 years with the YMCA, from her beginnings at the Easton YMCA.  Shania was raised in Easton and spent quite a bit of her childhood at the Easton YMCA.

Robbie Gill is the Chief Executive Officer of the YMCA of the Chesapeake, which operates 10 facilities on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, as well as one location in Chincoteague, Virginia.  Robbie was raised in Charlotte, NC, and worked for the YMCA in Wilmington NC and Houston TX before moving to the Eastern Shore.  He has raised 4 children on the Eastern Shore and has worked for the YMCA in Easton since 2005.

Robbie began the discussion with a bit of history and there has been a YMCA on the Eastern Shore since 1857!  There is a new YMCA in Chestertown, serving Kent County and the surrounding area.  A new YMCA is under construction in Queen Anne’s County.  Overall the YMCA of the Chesapeake serves 45,000 members.

Prior to the pandemic, the YMCA was looking at options to upgrade and improve the existing Talbot Avenue facility, which would likely have cost $6 million.  During the pandemic, the YMCA helped with food delivery and supporting critical staff through childcare programs.  Post pandemic, the YMCA felt it needed to better understand the needs of the community.  70% of kids locally cannot pass a standard swim test.  The YMCA would like to improve swimming/water safety for kids and adults.  Drowning is the second leading cause of death for children.  The Dorchester YMCA would like to add capacity for other programs for kids and teens, but are constrained by the current space, which limits the ability to add certain programs.  The YMCA would also like to focus on other chronic disease prevention and memory assistance programs for adults.

Significant challenges are identified in the current facility. While the pool is heated, the temperature cannot be raised to a level to accommodate older adults, young swimmers and individuals with special needs. The gym is not air-conditioned.  The current YMCA location (40,000 sq ft) serves 3,100 members and there are concerns that even if the building is expanded, membership will not increase.  Membership is open to everyone, regardless of ability to pay.  Currently, 1 of 3 members receives a type of financial assistance.  Prior to moving forward with the renovation, the YMCA decided to explore moving to another site.  YMCA officials worked with volunteers who were part of a real estate exploratory committee.  The real estate committee tested three sites.  One site was near Maple Dam Road and Rt 16 near the High School.  It scored the lowest and was found unlikely to increase membership as it was located in a low-density area.  The existing 201 Talbot Avenue scored second, and it was projected that membership would not grow much after expansion due to the location.  The site at Cambridge Harbor (previously known as Sailwinds) scored the best and was projected to serve 7,800 individuals in that location, citing similarities to the new Kent County facility that has grown its membership to 6,200.  A new facility at Cambridge Harbor would have a six-lane heated pool with zero entry, an indoor walking track and double the gym space.  Additional space for programs and a location on the river could allow them to provide lifeguards at the Cambridge Harbor beach, as well as kayaking and other water-based programs.  It would likely be 70,000 square feet with a projected cost of $22-25 million.  Next steps for the YMCA are to determine if this amount of funding that can be raised for the project.  The footprint of a new YMCA would be approximately 1.4 acres and CWDI is supportive of the move to Cambridge Harbor.

Several questions were presented by the CAN Board, as well as members and individuals in the audience:

*Why relocate as opposed to renovate?*  Market study by Triangle2 (triangle2.com) indicates the current site could not accommodate the community needs.  Triangle2 has completed 6 studies for the YMCA of the Chesapeake in the past. Study identified that even if facilities were expanded on the existing site, membership would be unlikely to grow greatly.  The site lacks space for the walking track, warm water pool and larger enhanced multi-purpose spaces.  It was mentioned there are members of the African American community that have indicated they are not comfortable utilizing the current site because of the past use of the school as a segregated white high school.  Discussion ensued on this point, with members of the audience indicating substantial African American participation in many programs and the overall use of the YMCA.  Staff indicated that there have been African American individuals that voiced this discomfort to them privately and felt it was located in an elite neighborhood.

*A significant number of members, including many younger folks, appear to visit the YMCA by bike or on foot, with only one busy street (Glasgow) to cross.  How will they be affected by a move and will the move result in greater car trips/traffic?*  Staff indicated only 10 or so kids ride bikes from adjacent neighborhoods and any new location would have bus access or they would still be able to walk.  The YMCA will partner as needed to provide transportation.

*There was a survey of members in 2022.  Are there results that can be shared?  Have there been other surveys of the larger community that are not yet members?*  The YMCA will share the survey results.

*Why does the CWDI property make sense as a location for the YMCA?  The Cambridge Harbor property is supposed to be geared toward economic development.  How is having a significant portion in the choicest location dedicated to a non-profit / non-tax paying entity supporting the economic development goals of Dorchester County and the City of Cambridge?*  The YMCA at this location could be a community hub and can draw folks to the area.  It was acknowledged it would not be a tourist draw.  There is some thought that this site is a neutral area for folks to come together, away from the segregated past of the old high school location and provide more equitable access to the waterfront.    Discussion ensued at this point, especially related to a non-profit occupying space at Cambridge Harbor.  Much messaging over the years has been to relocate the old hospital and turn Cambridge Harbor into an economic tourist engine that will improve the local economy and generate property tax revenue.

*Where would folks park at CWDI?*  That would be part of the master plan being developed for the entire area.

*If this location is to serve Dorchester County, if you must move, why move to the edge of the county, rather than somewhere more centrally located for the Dorchester County members. There is plenty of land not located on the waterfront*?  The YMCA will be located only within the City and the site on Maple Dam scored poorly as it was not a densely populated area.

*The YMCA appears to be part of the greater fabric of the athletic fields behind the schools and School Street.  How will the move affect this situation?*  The YMCA does not use the fields at all.

*Dorchester County gifted the real property to the YMCA.  Are there any obligations attached to the gift that was made?*  The YMCA was given the property in 1998 and there are not any covenants or restrictions on the property.  They are free to dispose of the property in a manner of their choosing.

*If the YMCA does move, what are the plans for the existing property?  Will it be sold?  How will neighbors and citizens have an opportunity to participate in what might happen with the site?*  Currently, the YMCA is in an exploratory phase and there will be no immediate relocation.  The YMCA would work collectively with the City and local residents to determine what might happen with this site.  The current site is zoned institutional and an audience member indicated there is not any institutional uses permitted at Cambridge Harbor.  It’s a priority of the neighbors to know what is going to happen on this property.  Robbie indicated that there will not be 2 YMCA’s in Cambridge and at the same time, the YMCA will not allow the Talbot site to become vacant and deteriorating.  The current location would remain open during the construction period of a new facility.  Several audience members voiced support for upgrading the existing facility on the existing site.  Robbie indicated the Dorchester YMCA serves fewer people than any other Y on the Eastern Shore and while tremendous improvements have been made, it still operates in the old white high school.  African Americans will not come here because it was once a white high school and the YMCA needs a new place where everyone in the community feels welcome.  As far as the name, Robbins gave $1 million to cover some of the pool debt issues, that is where the naming came from and it will continue to have that name, if it moves.  No other YMCA’s on the Eastern Shore are located on the waterfront.  An audience member asked if there were plans with the City to rezone, etc.?  Robbie indicated not at this time as the first conversations are with the CWDI.

Other public comments:

Audience member commented that she did not believe the survey was correct and this YMCA is open to/serves all members of the community.  She advocated at least keeping the existing facility until the new one is built.

Audience member stated that the community does not need another Mill/Academy School street type scenario, with a deteriorating building and years long debate and failed development attempts.

Audience member asked if the YMCA would explore additional sites and it was indicated no, they have already evaluated enough sites.

Audience member asked if there are any YMCA Board members that are also members of CWDI and it was confirmed there are not.

Audience member commented that they thought folks could come together at the existing YMCA.

Several audience members commented on the issue related the loss of tax revenue at Cambridge Harbor if non-profits locate at the site.

Audience member commented that this decision was similar to locating the State Hospital Facility on the waterfront instead of a State University.  Essentially, the community might live to regret placing a non-profit on the waterfront at the expense of something that might generate greater tourism or tax revenue.  Suggested Board of Ed, or old Junior High School as a potential location in the center of town, with lots of acreage.

**CAN would like to extend a very big thanks to Robbie, Shania and the YMCA for hosting the meeting.**