

CAN's Unofficial Notes on the Cambridge City Council Work Session on Housing

The Council held a special work session on October 23, 2023 to discuss housing and rental property issues. The session was called after the City tried to implement a new Ordinance on Short Term Rentals and found that they did not have an adequate system in place to deal with these rentals. Keeping track of the different phases of different types of housing/rental units is an extremely complex problem. The records that need to be kept and coordinated for housing in the city include Registration, Licensing, Inspection and Enforcement for various types of housing such as non-owner-occupied rentals, short term rentals, bed and breakfast rentals, accessory dwellings, country inns, boarding houses, and group homes. In order to address the problem, the City Manager conducted a study headed up by Cheryl Hannan, which was the basis for the meeting.

The study laid out some interesting facts. Cambridge has 5,564 housing units of which 58% are rentals; 3,200 of the residential units are rentals and approximately 1,000 are not registered. In addition, 14% of the housing units (or 900 units) are vacant. The study also compared Cambridge to ten other Maryland cities and found that Cambridge was the only one that did not do any housing inspections. The study also found out that Cambridge does not have a unified system for handling housing issues with different departments handling different segments and poor communications among the city administrators. Finally, the study recommended that instead of following past practices of trying to correct one issue at a time, the City should adopt a comprehensive approach and deal with all the systems at one time. The study estimated that it will take at least a year to get things under control and the departments working in unison.

The work session praised the City Manager and Ms. Hannan for their work on the report. Commissioner Harrington asked that the new system track vacant housing. Commissioner Roche had several observations as follows:

1. Noting that Group homes are State regulated, which overrides the City code but there are a number of issues that can be enforced by the City
2. Stating a need for the City to register and license the 1,000 vacant rentals

3. Stating that the City should have “tiered inspections” which favor good landlords and punishes bad ones
4. Stating that commercial parking lots should be registered if they are going to tow cars for unauthorized parking. This issue involves proper signage and clear markings in the lot, so the police and the public know it is illegal to park there.
5. Stating that commercial parking lots should also be built with the latest environmental guidelines.

Several people spoke in the public comment section and were mostly very favorable about the report. The meeting ended at 5:50.