

Alan Jennings: “There is too much to do”

The Bethlehem Gadfly Candidates for election, City government, Election January 4, 2021

 *Latest in a series of posts on City Government* 

We turned the corner. New year. Time for resolutions. Setting agendas. Mayoral and Councilperson elections coming into view. Platforms forming. Gadfly welcomes essays like this. Getting us thinking. What needs to be done? What is it on which we'd like to see local government working?

selections from Alan Jennings, “Strap in Lehigh Valley, we have things to do.” Morning Call, January 3, 2020.

Well, that was the year from hell. Certainly, the worst of my 62.

Let's just try to move on. There is too much to do.

To be sure, our most challenging problems are national in scope . . .

But there are a ton of issues right here in our own little once-green spot on the planet we call the Lehigh Valley. Here is what you can expect the Community Action Committee of the Lehigh Valley to pursue.

The big project is the completion of a strategic plan for diversity, equity and inclusion. For many months, now, dozens of people from the nonprofit, for-profit and public sectors have been crafting a strategy to finally unlock the doors that have kept far too many from accessing economic opportunity.

It will include better access to markets for minority-owned businesses, elimination of cash bail and other criminal justice reforms, testing (some call it “secret shoppers”) various groups to ensure they are treating people the same regardless of the color of their skin or the language they speak, more participation on boards of directors, and much, much more.

This should be a game-changer, folks.

The condition of our housing stock needs an enormous amount of funding to bring it up to modern (meaning habitable) standards. We are dramatically expanding our work in this area.

The efficiency of COVID-19 in its destruction of small businesses will open many opportunities for new businesses in this market. CACLV has tripled its small business coaching and lending capacity.

The Lehigh Valley has successfully transitioned from an industrial economy to a broader, more diverse economy; and, yet, we have not lost the identity and culture of that past. We have a lot of “hip” going on, with ArtsQuest leading the way. Allentown’s downtown revitalization, the Easton vibe, Bethlehem’s gentility and other factors make it a real, live, developing culture with an enviable quality of life.

We’ve got colleges, top-notch health care systems, a business community that is refreshingly progressive. Even the Chamber CEO is a closet liberal (couldn’t help outing you, Tony).

We’ve got Musikfest (I hope), minor league hockey and baseball teams and a top-notch sports and concert arena.

But we aren’t good enough. With one in eight Lehigh County residents and one in 11 Northampton County residents living below the poverty line, and a marketplace that is merciless, too many are being left behind.

The unaffordability of housing in this market and its substandard condition is worse than a crisis — it's a disaster. It is a public health problem by causing asthma and lead poisoning. It is an education problem by forcing families to move frequently, disrupting the rhythm of their lives, especially the kids' educations. And if the schools struggle to teach, it becomes a community development issue if people of means don't want to live here.

Check this out: 79% of white children who live in suburban communities take the college entrance exams (SAT or ACT). Just 8% of urban Latinos take the exams, and a particularly shocking 4% of urban African Americans take them. Those three data points are all we need to understand why color and class are almost synonymous in the Lehigh Valley; they also explain tidily why there is so much income and wealth disparity in our society.

The weaknesses in our behavioral health services, from detox and residential rehab to the critical shortage of psychiatrists, are known by all, including our two, big systems. COVID-19 is a roll-the-dice complication to all these issues.

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