

Gadfly council forum #5: Bethlehem: a tale of two cities?

[The Bethlehem Gadfly](#) [Candidates for election](#), [Election](#), [Forum](#) April 14, 2021

 Latest in a series of posts on the Gadfly Forum 

The Council candidates comparison chart

Candidates: Callahan, Crampsie Smith, Kwiatek, Leon, Wilhelm

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“The Southside doesn’t need to be MADE vibrant: it is vibrant. Our responsibility is to support that vibrancy.”

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“We are One!”

Bryan Callahan

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Hillary Kwiatek

Another week, another Gadfly prompt from hell for our candidates!

I joked in the prompt audio that they’re wishing I’d ask about something easy, like fixing potholes.

But Gadfly is up in the stratosphere. Literally. Gadfly asked everybody to look at Bethlehem from a high up perspective.

Inspired by Mark Iampietro's "Lookout yoga," Gadfly asked the candidates to take the proverbial 30,000ft. view of our town.

And what did they see? one city, one city with two complementary parts, one city with two different parts, one city with two contrary parts, one city with equal parts, two (or more) cities ?



The candidates are good sports.

If you want to listen to my full prompt. click [here](#).

Rachel Leon

Thank you, Gadfly, for another thought-provoking prompt.

Are we a city of two cities?

I was born and raised in South Bethlehem, so I can only speak from my experience.

Cities all over our country are broken into downtown areas, arts districts, and historic districts. What makes this so pronounced in Bethlehem is the presence of our river. A 10-minute walk across the Fahy can feel like leaving one city and entering another, but we are all Bethlehem.

The labeling of Bethlehem as a city of two cities can feel a bit antiquated, especially when viewing the divide within the historic context of the joining of the three boroughs. However, I felt this divide growing up in South Bethlehem. Whatever reason led to



Bethlehem feeling like a city divided, those sentiments have lingered. I hear this sentiment echoed as I continue speaking to people about how I can help if I am elected. What I hear most often is that we need a strong voice for the Southside. The implication, to me, is that they do not feel heard. I know for a fact that South Bethlehem has had amazing community leadership speaking loudly in defense of our communities. Maybe the issue isn't the speaking but the ability to hear their voices. If they aren't being heard, maybe they are being spoken over.

Bethlehem is a beautiful city with a unique history. A history that is important to preserve, even while we move toward increased development. I am passionate in my belief that development needs to be intentional and considerate of the communities we are asking to bear the brunt of continued development. South Bethlehem is often spoken about in terms of student housing and lower income families. Affluence and struggle. This just isn't true. Communities are not monoliths; they are made up of people of diverse backgrounds, be that ethnic or financial. If we miss this important fact, we miss what makes South Bethlehem so special.

So, as a resident of South Bethlehem, I can best answer the question of if we are divided by continuing to raise the voices of people in South Bethlehem who believe we are. They aren't digging back 100 years to validate their ideas. They are pointing to decisions that have been made in recent years. Decisions that they have shown up to stand against. Decisions that they have fought against. Decisions, that in the end, they were unable to stop from being made. I hope that, as Bethlehem continues to move forward, we listen to all our communities and how they want to see their city grow and develop. I hope that elected officials ensure that the southside doesn't become the default location for unwanted land uses or over-development. I hope that we value all areas of our city for their own unique history even as we continue to work together toward a stronger, more united Bethlehem.

Kiera Wilhelm

Gadfly, your audio prompt was heartfelt; we could hear it in your voice. It was the kind of prompt I'd actually like to have a stretch of time to

converse with you over—it is really the beginning of a meaningful and nuanced conversation, and one I hope we'll get to have in person someday, perhaps over a coffee, or a beer or two.

The City of Bethlehem has so much to offer: an important history and historic districts, great downtown, world-class educational institutions, hard-working small businesses, passionate and dedicated neighbors, inspiring community leaders, rich diversity, a vibrant arts and culture scene.



I wonder, if upon reading that, one's mind jumps back-and-forth across the river. If so, that makes sense. We have notions about *what exists where* in Bethlehem. But it's important to note that everything in that list exists on the Southside.

It was recently brought to my attention, by a wise and insightful individual (who also happens to be a Southside resident, and one deeply involved in its community), that it is not uncommon for people to speak about the Southside, even subconsciously, as if it needs “saving.” Upon hearing this, countless conversations flashed through my mind: words I had said or had heard others say. A developer claiming that a project would “rescue” a street or a block. Even well-meaning community members can advance this narrative. But the Southside doesn't need to be MADE vibrant: it is vibrant. Our responsibility is to support that vibrancy.

In your prompt, you mention the pedestrian bridge. As you know, a foundational part of my approach to being a councilperson is warmly inviting residents into the process, to participate. Warm invitations can take the form of giant structures, like bridges. I see the pedestrian bridge as a literal and figurative “warm invitation”: it draws us to the center, and across. On the bridge, we'll pass our neighbors on foot or on bikes; we'll engage, interact. Maybe it's dotted with public art, created by artists from both sides of the river. Maybe there are intentional places to pause and chat for a while, or just *be*: to breathe deeply over the expanse of the

Lehigh. The pedestrian bridge turns the river into something other than the “fissure“ you wonder about. (For what it’s worth, I envision future opportunities for our residents to not just cross the river but to spend time on its banks together. It’s such a beautiful resource, with so much more to offer us.)

As you suggest, there is a complex history between the South and North sides of Bethlehem post-incorporation, and there are many preconceived notions that still need to be changed. It takes time to change perceptions, but there are so many things as a City that we can help to do that. To connect and invite a City that feels even more united. Not homogenized, but equal parts of a rich, greater whole.

I’m so pleased to speak about the Southside, but I don’t claim to speak *for* the Southside. I want to *listen* to the southside, learn from its residents and community members, and let those voices, those needs, help guide the ways in which we support its growth. Conversations – speaking, listening, speaking, listening – are crucial to that process, and a wonderful part of it.

Is Bethlehem “a tale of two cities”? That’s one way to look at it. And one way to look at *that* is with gratitude. It makes me think of words I shared in Prompt #2, regarding economic development vs. history:

I love living in a City full of history I can see; there is inspiration and significance in preserving what came before us and in being literally surrounded by it. . . . I also love living in a City that innovates with creative vision for a vibrant and sustainable future for all of its citizens. A City that embraces its diversity, supports local business, and cares for its environment and those in need. That is invigorated by public art, green spaces, and walkable streets. That builds on its successes, learns from its mistakes, and keeps at its heart the well-being of every resident. All of these things are Bethlehem. Here, we don’t have just one or the other. We get to have both.

Aren’t we lucky?

Bryan Callahan

Hi Ed,

When I was at Liberty High School in 1980, I can honestly tell you that one of my greatest memories I had was that we all felt the same love and passion for our school and community. In our eyes we were at the greatest high school in the world. We all felt that Liberty was the real world, a microcosm of not only the City but also the State of Pennsylvania and our Country. We had everything within the boundaries of our school. Think about it, we had pockets of areas within the city of great wealth, great poverty, a huge middle class, upper middle class, and lower middle class. We had large numbers of every nationality you could imagine — Irish, Italians, Germans, African Americans, Hispanics, Greeks, Portuguese, Slovaks, you name it we had it! It was a beautiful thing, and the best part about it was we were all Liberty Hurricanes!



That feeling permeated not only Liberty but also the City. No matter where you lived in the City, we were from Bethlehem and damn proud of it! To this day I still feel that same pride and passion for our City. When I drive around the city, I am always amazed and proud of how diverse not only the City as a whole is but also each area and section of the City. I don't see a poor side of town or a rich side of town. Every area and section of our city is so diverse.

As we drive around the city, let's seriously think of what we do have!

On the North side we are driving down Macada Rd between Center St and Linden. Macada is lined with some of the most expensive homes in the City, mansions with high income wealth. One block to the North on Johnson drive we have moderate income ranch homes and split-level homes. At the end of Johnson Dr., we have upper middle-class homes on Beaufort/Marchant Dr., and literally across Linden St. we have lower income housing in the Sherwood apartments complex. A block past the

Sherwood apartments we have the large middle-class neighborhood of East Hills.

On the West side we are driving down W. Market St and Prospect Ave in the Mount Airy neighborhood. We are again driving by some of the largest and most expensive homes in the City. One block to the south of Prospect, on Spring Street, Calypso, and Filbert Streets we have moderate to low-income housing. One block to the north of Prospect and Market we have another huge middle-class neighborhood that runs all along the Avenues. A 1/4-mile to the West of the Avenues is the Rosemont and Beverly Ave. neighborhood that is another area of high income/large homes. Throw in the great middle-class neighborhoods in the Clearview and Kaywin sections of the West side and, hopefully you are starting to see a pattern of diversity within the city.

In the downtown center city area we have the Historic District which arguably has the most expensive properties in the City. This is an area of extreme wealth. Three blocks to the north of the Historic district we have a much more moderate level housing in the areas of Garrison, Ettwein, Fairview, Frankford, and Goepp Streets.

On the east side of our city we have the moderate to high income housing of the Edgeboro area and very affordable, moderate income housing from Jennings St. all the way down to Stefko Blvd. On the other side of Stefko we have lower income housing in the Pembroke and Marvine areas.

On the south side we have low-income housing in the Lynfield Terrace area and some very affordable housing from Hayes Street all the way down to Wyandotte St. The one thing that the Southside did not have (that all the other areas and sections of the city did) was a place for the upper middle class (mostly professors at Lehigh and doctors and interns at St. Luke's) who love the proximity to their work and the energy of the Southside. That void was filled by the 90 plus unit 510 Flats building on 3rd St.

I still, to this day, see the great diversity of our city as a strength and work every day to continue to make it better. We are One!

Hillary Kwiatek

As I sit in the attic office on the third floor of my house and ponder this question, I'm pulled back into the distant past of this place. Our house was built in 1860 by George Leibert, not long after the Moravian Church began allowing the sale of these lands to non-Moravians. It's a simple brick Federal style house on a street in West Bethlehem built before the area was incorporated as its own city.



Taking this longer view, I would humbly suggest to you that we are not a city of two cities or even three cities — rather, we are a city of many cities over hundreds of years of history. Turn the clock back 160 years, and we are still three places — one with a neat grid of established streets. One making its way toward the foot of South Mountain. And one that is still largely farmland. But on a freshly drafted map, there sits the house in which I type these words, a modest home for regular folks.

Now, fast forward just 20 years and catch a Bird's Eye View of "The Bethlehems" on a map located in the Library of Congress. With the incorporation of West Bethlehem, we are now truly three cities. Industry is growing along the river. Immigrants are coming from across the world to work in factories. More streets appear in South Bethlehem. The first buildings of Lehigh University appear.

By 1894, there are factories belching smoke on the banks of the Lehigh, but West Bethlehem is still largely open space and farms. Within twenty years, the grid of West Bethlehem will be filled in with the bonus homes of Bethlehem Steel executives and then the bungalows of the new middle class. South Bethlehem's growth continues as more and more workers are needed.

In 1917, we become one Bethlehem. But our paths still don't totally converge. Over the 100 years since incorporation, even more cities within our city appear — the post-war boom powers rapid expansion northward as ranch homes and suburban-style tract housing appears. People are looking for a patch of grass, a bit more space between neighbors. A bedroom for each kid.

So now that I've taken you on a tour of our city over the last 160 years, I ask, is any city ever just one city? I don't believe so. We are a city of multiple cities, and I think that's a fantastic thing. Our history is long and varied. Each space holds the stories of the lived experiences of those who came before us.

But this doesn't mean that we don't have a shared and common purpose. We can appreciate the cultures, character, and history of each part of Bethlehem regardless of which part we might claim as our neighborhood. And we can fight for equity in resources such as green space, access to quality food, and affordable housing for the residents of every corner of this great city. We can dwell alongside our past while envisioning a bold, progressive future. And we can work to conserve our history while welcoming the newest members of our community.

At **today's groundbreaking** for the Borinqueneers monument, we saw all of this happening in real time. With Councilwoman Olga Negrón taking the lead, the city is partnering with Lehigh's Southside Initiative and the Community Action Development Corporation of Bethlehem to create a memorial to the bravery and service of members of our Puerto Rican community, many of whose families moved here generations ago to work at Bethlehem Steel. The monument will be located on The Greenway, a project that created a linear park for the enjoyment of everyone. The monument will be a dominoes table, providing an opportunity for residents to spend time together while remembering the brave members of the division.

As someone whose work and life take her back and forth across the river daily, I love the diversity of our streetscapes and vistas. I wouldn't want our city to have just one identity. What makes Bethlehem special is its ever-changing community of people who chose to make it their home and how they shape this place through their presence. If I am fortunate enough to be elected by the people of Bethlehem, I would work every day to make this city the place they want to and are able to stay.

Grace Crampsie Smith

Residents are welcome to fashion reflections on candidate comments, sending them to ejg1@lehigh.edu. On Gadfly we seek the good conversation that builds community, so please be courteous at all times. Gadfly retains the right to abridge and to edit your reflections and to decline posts that are repetitive or that contain personal attacks. Gadfly will publish resident reflections on the week's Forum at noon on Friday.