

# Grading the Parking Authority responses

The Bethlehem Gadfly Parking, Serious Issues August 15, 2019

*(108th in a series of posts on parking)*

You can never take the prof out of the Gadfly.

Thinking forward to the probable re-appearance of the Bethlehem Parking Authority at the August 20 City Council meeting to finalize the Polk Street Garage financial matters (\$16.8m . . . \$16.8m . . . \$16.8m) and to propose increases in the fine structure, Gadfly is thinking back to their first appearance at the July 2 meeting.

And he would like to say something about BPA responses to questions from Council members, something that will help explain his personal unease with the BPA and at the same time also help give you an idea of your Council members at work (which is one of the Gadfly project missions).

First, the questions from Councilwoman Van Wirt. Listen in:

**AUDIO RECORDINGS UNAVAILABLE IN THIS ARCHIVE**

PVW here is concerned about contract parking rates in the garages. PVW — the scientist (among other things, of course) — tends to ask clear, crisp, direct questions. In this clip she asks just such a question: “Can someone tell me why we aren’t pricing these spots according to the market?”

BPA does not answer directly. This is the kind of thing that drives Gadfly crazy. Gadfly would teach his students that the proper format response

to this question is “We aren’t pricing these spots according to the market because \_\_\_\_\_.” A direct question begets a direct answer before any contextual or explanatory information. Instead BPA muddles the answer. Gadfly calls this gobbledygook when he reported on the meeting a month ago.

Another *indirect* question in this clip — “I would assume that the demand in Bethlehem is commensurate with other cities our size” — receives the same off-center response. Is or is our demand not commensurate? Gadfly is not sure he knows after the BPA response.

Another example, which Gadfly finds humorous:

PVW asks another clear, crisp, direct question: “If something catastrophic happens . . . and you can’t pay [each of the three loans] . . . which one would you pay first?” The very next words from BPA — as Gadfly would counsel his students — should be “The one we would pay first would be \_\_\_\_\_.” And then any contextual or explanatory information. Instead what we have is gobbledygook again. Gobbledygook so bad, in fact, that PVW has to ask “Can you put that in simpler terms for me?” Now that’s funny. Though not to the quite serious, quite focused PVW.

This kind of lack of clarity is one of the things that has bothered Gadfly throughout his observations of BPA. It does not inspire a sense of trust. It makes Gadfly’s head spin sometimes. BPA is often hard to pin down. There’s a haze that hovers over much of their communication.

Second, the questions from Councilman Reynolds.

When Gadfly reported on this interchange earlier, he said that “JWR raised some interesting long-term, wonkish, ‘10,000 feet up’ questions

quite characteristic of his wide-ranging approach to gathering information.”

One had to do with the impact of ride-sharing and autonomous vehicles on parking demand.

Gadfly found that a *very* interesting and important question — after all, think of that \$16.8m and a garage 1/3 filled 20 years from now — and, surprisingly, found BPA’s answer *very* focused. Perhaps because the question goes to the very heart of parking industry existence.

A good question, indeed.

And BPA was prepared with a focused answer.

One that justified the \$16.8m expenditure.

Interesting.

But perhaps JWR would have done well to be more skeptical in his acceptance of BPA’s answer, though he made a credible point about our population growth.

Jeff Speck (2018) — whom you know Gadfly has been reading and whom Gadfly now considers a member of the family — writes, “Whether a city should build any new downtown parking structures is a good question. . . . Given the onset of ride-sharing services and, eventually, autonomous vehicles, the answer in most cases is probably no.”

The parking industry representative had a stock justification of his existence and of a \$16.8m outlay at the ready.

Other experts might not agree.

Gadfly is not sure you would want to base your faith in the future of parking garages solely on the opinion of a guy whose job it is to build them.