

Gadfly mayoral forum #4: innovative projects

[The Bethlehem Gadfly](#) [Candidates for election](#), [Election](#), [Forum](#), [Gadfly Forum](#) April 6, 2021

 *Latest in a series of posts on the Gadfly Forum* 

The Mayoral candidate comparison chart

Because of the Easter holiday weekend, we've pushed our Forum posts back a day, and we'll continue a Tuesday forum for the mayoral candidates and a Wednesday one for the Council candidates going forward.

This time the Gadfly Forum asks different questions of our candidates.

Once again, a tip o' the hat to our candidates. Voting is getting closer, and everybody is getting busier. The extraordinary care taken with these responses is obvious.

The prompts:

Willie:

You have been a City Councilman for a long time. You have a record of achievement that includes Northside 2027, the Climate Action Plan, and the Open Data Portal. You tout that achievement as a basis for your qualifications to be mayor.

Speaking as an average citizen, Northside 2027 and the Climate Action Plan are easy to "get." I see what Northside 2027 is and understand its value. I see what the Climate Action Plan is and understand its value.

But speaking as an average citizen, I don't "get" the Open Data Portal. Frankly, I have never gone [there](#) till 20 minutes before writing this, and I don't understand its value except, perhaps, for the green eyeshade type folk who find numbers aphrodisiac and charts of pie delicious.

Here's what you say on your candidate web site about the Open Data Portal:

“I am proud to have proposed and created Open Bethlehem – our city’s first open data program. Open data allows citizens access to data related to local government, our community, and our neighborhoods. People throughout the country, when given access to government collected data, have found innovative and creative uses for the data that improve their community. Some applications of city open data initiatives include the tracking of budget revenue and projections, the efficiency of city services, health and code violations, police department statistics, and economic investment information. Bethlehem’s open data program has the potential to transform the ways in which citizens are able to access and utilize public data in an effort to improve our community. Bethlehem’s Open Data portal can be viewed [here.](#)”

Please make the Open Data Portal interesting and valuable to me as an average citizen.

Perhaps take me to (be clear about how to navigate) and expand upon 2-3 specific examples of data you think an average citizen would be (should be?) most interested in or surprised by.

And, most intriguing of all, is it possible for you suggest or speculate how having access to that data might be useful for individual or groups of citizens striving to improve their community, as you claim?

Thanks for your service.

Dana:

You were a City administrator for many years. But not lately.

You have told us of significant accomplishments during your significant time with the City. But you have none lately.

What you do have, though, contrary to Willie, are plans for intriguing new projects – such as the small business concierge and the reorganization of parking.

Here’s what you say about these two ideas:

Parking Authority Reform: Bethlehem needs a kinder, gentler parking authority. Many residents and small business owners feel that the Bethlehem Parking Authority is not approachable, and as a result is out of touch with the community that they are attempting to serve. I will address this and will consider moving the day-to-day operation into city hall, with the Parking Authority operating solely as the financing arm of that operation. This would give residents and business owners recourse through their elected representatives.



Small Business Assistance: Small businesses are the backbone of our local retail, restaurant, commercial and service sector. I understand many of the concerns that other small business owners have expressed to me. Small businesses are a critical part of our community’s economic vitality, and city government needs to recommit to providing assistance to current and prospective small businesses in Bethlehem. My administration will create a “small business concierge” to do exactly that.

Please expand on one or both of these ideas (depending on how much you have to say) – the need for them, their purpose, how they would operate, the value for the residents, and the city.

Thanks for your willingness to serve.

J. William Reynolds

Open data is about transparency, innovation, and collaboration with the community. It is also about possibility.

- **What is [Open Bethlehem](#) now?** First and foremost, it is about transparency. If one visits Open Bethlehem, they can track our budget, our revenues, our expenditures, and the cost drivers. Snow operations, street overlays, and pension costs are just a few of the

topics one is able to track on a year to year basis. This information provides the structure for our budget every year. Rather than waiting for the budget to come around in November, one can see the revenues and expenditures that control the vast majority of what is included in the draft budget in November and December. This is a huge improvement over the previous process that one would have to undertake to find any of this financial data.

- **What can Open Bethlehem be?** The next Administration needs to expand the public data that citizens are able to see. How many housing violations are in my neighborhood? How many building permits are currently active in my neighborhood? What streets are the most traffic tickets given out on? Other cities are leading the way in making this information easily accessible to the citizens of their community.

Open data is also about innovation. Government data has long influenced private sector and institutional decision-making. For example, hospital networks often make decisions on what services to provide in a certain area based on census data. Our City Health Bureau has valuable data that is extraordinarily helpful to our hospital networks. These data sets have enormous short- and long-range consequences and potential benefits for public health in our community. The pandemic has proved the necessity for this type of cooperation. This is only one example of public and private innovation. There are also extensive benefits to working with school districts, entrepreneurs, and social service providers which leads to our next question . . .

- **How do we get to the next stage of Open Data as a community?** It starts with asking the community what data sets that they want. Our Open Bethlehem site now is effective if one is looking for information on city finances. We have not, however, even scratched the surface of the capabilities of what we can do with the above mentioned groups and institutions. This will not happen by accident, however. When I launched the concept of Open Bethlehem, I launched the Open Data Working Group that met with hospital network representatives, business leaders, city staff, and interested citizens to talk about the possibilities. The Working Group led to the launch of Open Bethlehem, but it must be empowered to expand the benefits of open data in our city. City staff are unable to know exactly

what the private sector, social service providers, and health care networks want. We need to bring them into City Hall to find out.

- **How else do we see the benefits of technology as a city?** This is not breaking news, but how well government utilizes technology will be a determining factor in the effectiveness and efficiency of government in the 21st century. Similar to the private sector, we need to invest in technological innovation within City Hall and in our community. Another thing we can do is sponsor community technology cooperation. Tech meetups with our tech community, hack-a-thons to create new city apps, and collaboration with universities and colleges are all examples of the types of initiatives that most cities are doing (and every city will do in the coming years). We should be able to track snow plows on our phones. We should make it easier to get text alerts about snow emergencies. Adding these types of services must be a priority for us in the coming years if we are going to continue to offer the high-quality city services that our residents have come to expect and enjoy.

As a city, we have started to use technology more efficiently, but we have a long way to go to. Open data is one part of that effort to expand our technological capabilities and improve our ability to deliver services in an efficient and equitable manner. Our success in building a fairer, more inclusive city depends on it.

Dana Grubb

I have observed and interacted with several City Councils over the years, both when I worked in City Hall and since then. I've witnessed professional and effective.

Council members, as well as unprofessional, ineffective, self-serving ones. Being a resident of the City but not part of its administration for the past 17 years has afforded

me objectivity and given me perspective regarding its government. It's been eye-opening, and I have at times been vastly disappointed in the decision-making process on Council.

I've witnessed a disturbing disingenuousness on the part of public officials with regard to issues they do not wish to address: in particular, the Bethlehem Parking Authority. More than once I've heard a Mayor or Member of Council tell someone who has a parking question or issue that they can't do anything because the BPA is a separate authority.

I've also listened to complaint after complaint from residents and business owners about the intransigent treatment given to those who feel that they've been disrespected or mistreated by the BPA. I recently received a video from a resident showing their



interaction with a very surly enforcement officer. Gadfly, you yourself have experienced a chilly reception at a BPA board meeting.

If you believe as I do that government's function is to provide service and be accountable, then it makes perfect sense to have the city's parking system responsible and accountable to Bethlehem residents and business owners through their elected representatives.

In order to improve service and accountability I've proposed bringing the day-to-day operation of the parking authority under the aegis of the Mayor and City Council. The authority would remain to fund and own the parking authority infrastructure, and the city Department of Parking would remain at the current North Street Parking Garage location. The Director of this department would be a member of the Mayor's cabinet and attend Mayor's staff meetings.

This model parallels the structure of the city's water system, so it's a very familiar and successful paradigm in Bethlehem city government.

My small business concierge proposal has also come as a result of repeated dissatisfaction expressed by small business owners about their

experiences with City Hall, whether as an existing owner trying to draw attention to a matter of importance or a prospective new business owner who has experienced many frustrating hurdles in City Hall as they tried to open a new business.

Having a one-stop shop that can provide a roadmap of assistance will encourage small businesses to locate in Bethlehem and allow existing owners to flourish. Acting on their behalf and walking them through the permitting, inspections and licensing process will encourage entrepreneurs to locate in Bethlehem. The small business concierge will also be able to link existing and future business owners to potential funding sources and assist them in filing applications for that assistance.

Small businesses are the backbone of our local economy. Their success is in all of our best interests.

Both of these ideas came about because I've been listening to residents and business owners, as a lifetime Bethlehem resident and small business owner myself.

When issues present themselves, we need a Mayor who has proven that they can find solutions, someone Bethlehem's residents can believe in, who won't play politics and jeopardize citizens' livelihoods or trivialize their concerns.

Lastly, I'd like to touch on a third proposal I've made, that of re-establishing the Department of Parks and Recreation. The pandemic has brought people into parks and playgrounds and onto trails, as they seek fresh air, exercise, and solace.

As I visited Bethlehem's parks and trails, I was dismayed at the lack of attention they've been receiving, especially when I saw how well-maintained parks and trails elsewhere were while I've been hiking and biking throughout Eastern Pennsylvania.

By restoring this department with an emphasis on maintenance and beautification, we can bring back what were at one time some of the nicest recreation facilities in the Lehigh Valley. Our residents deserve as much.

I believe that all three of these initiatives will benefit Bethlehem residents by providing more accountability on parking matters, improving the business climate in our town, and keeping our recreation facilities well maintained and safe for the heavy usage they've been experiencing. This allows all of us to "Believe in a Better Bethlehem."

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.

The Bethlehem Gadfly