

# What shape will the Community Engagement Initiative take and when?

The Bethlehem Gadfly Community Engagement Initiative September 14, 2020

 *Latest in a series of posts about the Community Engagement Initiative* 

Councilman Reynolds — co-sponsor with Councilwoman Crampsie Smith of the July 7 resolution that urged a Community Engagement Initiative — has been the prime articulator of the goals and possible shape of the CEI.

It might be instructive for us to revisit his two main statements about the CEI:

July 7: **‘Reynolds rationale for the resolution’**

August 11: **“Councilman Reynolds on the Community Engagement Initiative”**

Let Gadfly summarize for you key points about the Community Engagement Initiative articulated by Councilman Reynolds:

- Goal: “The Community Engagement Initiative is not about our police department; it is about a different kind of conversation and looking at the ways that we as a community can end systemic racism and create an equitable city.”
- Shape: “There can be two types of meetings, one type of meeting could be run by the City of Bethlehem similar to [the Public Safety meeting] . . . The second type of meeting, though, could and needs to be run by organizations and groups in our community . . . [schools, churches, social justice organizations]. . . . It is important that City Hall or Council doesn’t control all of these meetings.”

Let’s talk about the shape of the CEI now and the goal in the next post.

## Meetings run by the City

Let’s think about this first type meeting. Since it’s run by the City (but “who” is that, as Gadfly’s last post asks?), this aspect of the CEI should be

easier to set up, and Gadfly wonders why we haven't already seen some progress here. What would these meetings be about? Councilman Reynolds already has a good idea. When he has spoken about the intertwining tendrils of systemic racism, he machine guns a litany of subject areas. In fact, the July 7 resolution itself contains a litany of agenda items. Topics for CEI meetings run by the City could include mental health, addiction, poverty, inclusionary housing, affordable housing, zoning, transportation, education, policing, employment practices. Thoughtful people might create such a list of the tendrils of systemic racism, consult about setting priorities, set priorities about which areas/issues to tackle first, and begin calling residents and people with special knowledge or expertise together to suggest the kinds of policies and legislation that would work to eradicate (he says boldly) racism in each area. Each meeting could be tasked to generate a list of ideas as well as a list of legislation. Gadfly feels that this type meeting has the best chance for getting things done quickly, and he wonders — ha! since, of course, he doesn't have to do any of the work — why it isn't up and running already.

### **Meetings run by community groups**

The goal of these meetings, says Councilman Reynolds, could be letting people share their experiences . . . whatever organizers of the meetings want. The decentralized nature of these meetings by design requires the host organization to set the agenda, control questions, etc. We're talking here about schools, churches, the Boy's and Girl's Club, New Bethany, and so forth. The agendas here would be set by the individual community groups. It is not clear to Gadfly how these meetings will be stimulated. It is not clear to Gadfly how substantive ideas from these meetings will get back to Council, it is not clear how the community groups will be assured that their ideas will get back to Council, for some Council members have already said that they will do their best but that for sure they would not be attending all such meetings. And the more meetings there are, the more successful the CEI catches on with community groups, the less likely Council will have much direct involvement at the grass roots level. If "we" succeed in sparking a thousand, a hundred, a dozen, a half-dozen "points of light," how is the loop closed and how are the ideas generated brought back to Town Hall for action? Councilman Reynolds stated that he had his own ideas, but that it was important that others be heard.

Gadfly gets the need for wide engagement, gets the need to assure that the agenda is open, but at this point Gadfly worries that there won't be cohesion and looks to hear more about how this type meeting will work as part of the CEI. The danger is that people are invited to talk, nothing comes of the talk, and civic participation loses even more ground. You might remember Gadfly astounded that after 27 people called in to the Public Safety Committee meeting August 11, they were promised no follow-up, just a kind of vague "we'll get back to ya," and at the subsequent Council meeting one week later there was (he thinks) no substantive mention of the Public Safety meeting at all, no mirroring of all that citizen input. Where did that several hours of citizen comment go? Poof.

Gadfly is not sure if Councilman Reynolds was saying that there could be two types of meetings running concurrently. That does seem too much. Maybe he was throwing his full weight behind this second type. If so, Gadfly feels it will take more organization than he's heard of so far, and he worries that time to meaningful action will spin out too far. But maybe that's not a problem for many of you. Being an old feller, Gadfly has a more acute sense of the value of time than others. But all of us probably believe that the sooner racism is stemmed the better. Let's get started.

Comments invited as always.

*to be continued . . .*