

Fighting City Hall: November 4, 1958

The Bethlehem Gadfly Bethlehem Moments, Gadfly's posts December 2, 2018

This story will be the subject of the next Bethlehem Moment at City Council.

You just never know. Where there's an interesting – and even inspiring – story for Bethlehem Moment.

Gadfly, as some of you are aware, is coming first-year anniversary of observing City was Christmas-time last year that he to act on his long-time hankerin' (Gadfly loves and for many years taught the classic Westerns – can you tell?) to attend some City Council meetings.

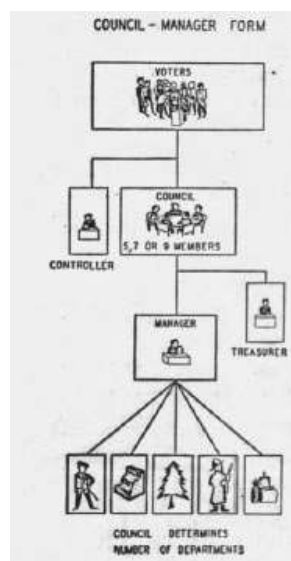
And he was immediately struck by the “architecture” of the meeting – Council members in judicial-like semicircle at the head of the hall, with the Mayor on the side. What's with this, Gadfly thought? Isn't the Mayor top-dawg? Then hearing the occasional distressed resident addressing his or her distress to a Council that in most instances had no direct powers to redress the distress. And meetings in which the Mayor seemingly rarely spoke, even in his assigned “report” time on the agenda. It took a while for Gadfly to recognize the Mayor's voice. At election time, from Gadfly's sideline seat, the mayoral race seemed the focus. City Council members were faceless to him. Yet here the site of power was the “City Council” meeting, seemingly above the mayor. City Council ran the meeting – did they “run” the City?

Curious to Gadfly. Odd. Puzzling. Intriguing.

How do things get done in the City? Who's in charge? Where's the power?

And why do we have this form of city government? And how did we get it?

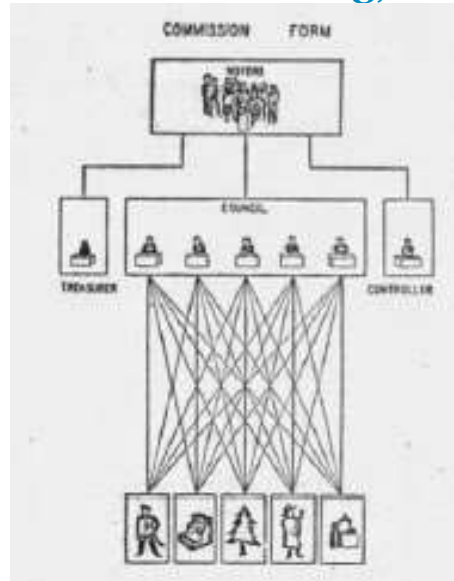
So Gadfly was happy to use a Bethlehem Moment as the occasion to do a little historical research. You'll find the long version of a piece of his research on this linked short essay – short but still too long for top billing on a blog like this. Gadfly hopes you will click the link and take a few of your own Bethlehem moments to read:



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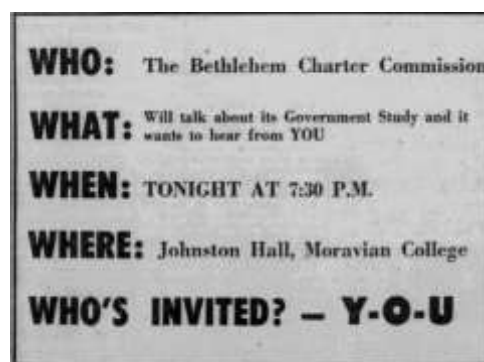
up on his
affairs. It
resolved

Fighting City Hall – and Winning, November 4, 1958



The short of this part of Gadfly's research is that when Bethlehem was born in modern form in 1917, it operated under the state-mandated Commission (so-called Weak Mayor) form of government. In 1957 the state granted cities the voluntary option of staying with that form or choosing between two other forms: the Strong Mayor-City Council form and the City Manager form.

The Democrats ran Bethlehem, and an entrenched element of the Democratic Party fought efforts by the Bethlehem Junior Chamber of Commerce to study the advantages and disadvantages of the three options and provide residents with an opportunity to choose among them. How's that for democracy – the opportunity to choose your form of government!! The “political novices” successfully fought the “machine,” educated the general populace about the choices they had, and voters ultimately chose our current Strong Mayor-City Council form of government.



It's a pretty amazing and, I say again, inspiring story of the power of the public to fight – and beat – City Hall. Not that every City Hall has to be beaten, mind you.

But this is the kind of story that we need to periodically remind us where the power ultimately lies. With us. Out here in the cheap seats at Town Hall. And beyond.

Please read: **Fighting City Hall – and Winning, November 4, 1958**

This is a story of Bethlehem residents taking control of their own destiny. Never easy. But doable.

