

# Public response to Community Engagement Initiative “lukewarm at best”

The Bethlehem Gadfly Community Engagement Initiative, George Floyd killing July 9, 2020

 *Latest in a series of posts responding to the George Floyd killing* 

As his wont, Gadfly has been working through Tuesday’s City Council meeting on the Community Engagement Initiative in chronological fashion, having given you posts on the in-person and by-phone public comment as well as Anna Smith’s comment in full, and he will be presenting the proposers’ responses next. In the meantime, here is the good *Morning Call* overview.

*from Christina Tatu, “Bethlehem residents pressure council for bold police reforms, including defunding the department.” Morning Call, July 8, 2020.*

On Monday, the creation of a 21-member NAACP community advisory board was announced. The board will meet monthly to review Bethlehem’s law enforcement policies, including use of force, police training and transparency. There will also be discussions about how race affects other issues like health, housing and education.

On Tuesday, City Council also approved a resolution to eventually hold a public forum for further discussions about police reform, social justice and race.

But the initiatives didn’t excite community members who spoke at the virtual meeting. They said they wanted to see real reform such as defunding the police.

That movement is gaining momentum across the county, with activists arguing for local governments to reallocate or redirect funds from law enforcement to education, social justice and other agencies.

“Community engagement is only a piece of improving policing,” said resident Anna Smith, adding that education and the development of an action plan to improve the police department’s demographics and its outreach efforts will be needed.

“I think we need to do more and demand more before we set the stage for a mediocre initiative,” she said, suggesting the city hire someone to oversee the development of social policies.

The council’s initiatives “look like “the same old, same old,” said Albert Wurth Jr. a political science professor at Lehigh University. “The most important thing I’d like to say is that it doesn’t look like a real response to the young people who I saw marching down Broad Street from my home,” he said.

The new community advisory board was created on the advice of the national NAACP, which directed its local chapters to meet with police, said Esther Lee, the longtime president of the Bethlehem NAACP. The board includes Mayor Robert Donchez, members of City Council, the Bethlehem Police Department, Bethlehem Health Department, clergy, students, members of the Bethlehem NAACP, Northampton County Executive Lamont McClure and Bethlehem Area School Superintendent Joseph Roy.

“Our desire is to initiate immediate change for encouraging transparency, accountability and effective communication that will stabilize the climate of the Bethlehem community and adjacent communities which are needed in these tumultuous times,” Lee said.

Rallies across the country and calls for police reform were sparked by the May 25 killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police and the deaths in recent years of other unarmed Black men across the country at the hands of police. While there haven’t been such occurrences in Bethlehem, Lee said members of the local NAACP felt they should come forward to discuss issues of social justice reform with leaders in the community.

“I’ve been here all my life. I think it’s time for us to come together, sit at the table and come to an agreement on how we can make life a little better,” she said.

Donchez said the group has met three times since June 15 and will meet again Monday. His goal is to release a community report on some of the initiatives discussed.

Police Chief Mark DiLuzio said the policy already includes the recommendations in the “8 Can’t Wait” campaign, which are points reformers have asked departments across the country to adopt, including: banning chokeholds, requiring de-escalation techniques, warning suspects before firing, using alternatives to guns and requiring officers to intervene when force is inappropriately applied.

On Tuesday night, City Council unanimously approved a second initiative to host a public forum discussing issues surrounding systemic racism like discrimination, race-based inequities, social justice, mental health, addiction, poverty, inclusionary housing, education and fair policing. But the coronavirus could complicate the forum.

Gatherings of more than 250 people are prohibited, even in the least restrictive green phase of Gov. Tom Wolf’s plan to mitigate the virus. City Council members spent some time Tuesday debating how they might host such an event. They hoped it might be held in the auditorium at Liberty High School, but noted people might not feel safe attending or some may be turned away because of the restrictions on crowd size.

Hosting a forum virtually could be complicated to manage. One idea is to postpone the meeting until the end of summer when it might be safer.

“I thought it was a good idea to get the resolution out there because it really is a concept, a structure that will allow for public pressure to create change within the city of Bethlehem. It’s about starting the conversation,” said Councilman J. William Reynolds who sponsored the resolution with Grace Crampsie Smith.

After hearing from the public, whose response to the forum was lukewarm at best, council amended the resolution.

Council added a sentence saying it will include the input of experts on community policing, and removed the first three paragraphs of the resolution, which praised city officials and the Bethlehem Police Department for efforts to protect the community while also overseeing the peaceful protests that have occurred.