


Gadfly all-abuzz again

The Bethlehem Gadfly Community Engagement Initiative October 29, 2020

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

Something Dr. Roy **said yesterday** nudges the Gadfly to make another comment about our plans for a Community Engagement Initiative, an idea dear to Gadfly's heart and mission.

But let him back up for a moment.

Gadfly likes — loves — the idea of a CEI but isn't crazy about **how we are going about it.**

He has latched on to the goal of the CEI in these words: “The Community Engagement Initiative is [about] looking at the ways that we as a community can end systemic racism and create an equitable city.”

(Those are Councilman Reynolds' words in his verbal explanation of the CEI at, m'thinks, the July 7 City Council meeting in which this CEI resolution with Councilwoman Crampsie Smith was adopted. Councilman Reynolds is a man of high ideals, but Gadfly worries that he might be making too much of what might just have been rhetorical exuberance on the Councilman's part. That's a helluva goal. “Audaciously ambitious.” Maybe not practical. Maybe no way achievable. Maybe not a platform a politician could run on. But Gadfly would like to hold the Councilman to his words if he could. They are good words. The best.)

Gadfly just doesn't see the announced means suitable **to that exalted end.**

Councilman Reynolds contemplates two types of meetings as part of a CEI. (The first type perhaps is the one **occurring tonight.**)

Let's focus on the second one, the one centered on meetings initiated by and managed by community organizations.

Gadfly has already virtually floated an **alternative version** of going about these meetings rather than waiting in a passive manner for such meetings to pop up. For time is passing and nothing has been announced yet.

Briefly, Gadfly would suggest that “we” take charge of initiating the meetings. The resolution itself has a list of topics/areas in which we would like meetings. We already know what needs to be talked about. So we approach appropriate community groups and stimulate meetings. Say we know that the homeless issue needs to be worked on. We approach an appropriate group — who? — New Bethany? — to host a meeting on the homeless. We ask them to discuss the question “What can the city do to help advance your goal of caring for the homeless?” We ask for an action item to work on. Then we go about our anti-racist work.

Otherwise, it seems to Gadfly “like sands through the hourglass are the days of our lives.”

No, you say, our attack on systemic racism can wait.

After all, as Gadfly has learned in the BAPL “**Courageous Conversations**” webinar (a little knowledge is a dangerous thing), the “inaugural defense of African slave-trading, the first European book on the Africans in the modern era” was Gomes Eanes de Zuara’s *The Chronicle of the Discovery and Conquest of Guinea* in 1453. Nearly 600 years ago. Virulent (is there any other kind, Gadfly?) racism has been in the soulstream of Western Civilization for nearly 600 years. One guesses waiting a few more months to begin an attack on it is of little matter. One guesses the objects of systemic racism can wait a little bit longer. No hurry.

And, after all as well, Gadfly, at age 80, admits to being impatient, for his time is on a short leash. His meter is running at a faster rate than probably all of his followers except one. Ha! He simply would like to hear local anti-racist progress read *to* him in Town Hall rather than *over* him at Fairview Cemetery. (Got a plot, Roy?)

At the end of the “Racial Justice” program yesterday a message went quickly by announcing a “Trust Building with Law Enforcement” program at the Hispanic Center in April. Wow! Terrific! But when was

that again? April. April. Another 5-6 months. And last Monday we added another name to the reasons for a “trust building” program — **Walter Wallace**. The list will no doubt grow by April.

Which brings Gadfly back to the Hispanic Center session with Dr. Roy yesterday morning that triggered this missive.

The subject was increasing diversity in the BASD teaching staff. The students spoke of feeling more comfortable if there were more teachers of color. Reasonable. But Dr. Roy spoke of the difficulty in recruiting. It’s not always an “easy sell,” said the good doctor, to convince, say, a teacher of color from Philadelphia that “this is a good place to live.” We need “to sell the Lehigh Valley” to them, he said, we must tell them what’s here for them, we must tell them “as a young person of color here are groups for you to connect with, things for you to do.” And apparently what we are, what we have is not working.

Audio Player not available in this archive

Now that kind of hit Gadfly — old white guy, proud of his town, thinking of all the apartments and parking garages we’re building — right between the eyes. We have a beautiful historic Northside downtown, right? Many, many people want to live here, right? Dr. Roy made me see Bethlehem through the eyes of a young, top-notch teacher of color from an area where he or she has an established professional cultural network. Why would he or she want to come here? What do we have to offer that person in the way of a place to live, a place to sink roots? Dr. Roy seems to indicate that can be a hard sell. Gadfly had never thought of it that way, never looked at it through a “colored” lens.

(If Gadfly is not mistaken, Sharon Brown made a similar point about the presence of Blacks in Bethlehem at the “Poets and Troubadors” session of last year’s Festival UnBound at Godfrey Daniels.)

So, suppose “we” stimulated a meeting with BASD and asked “What can the city do to help advance your anti-racist goals so important for the education of our children?” Give us an action item. And suppose the answer was the BASD has a hard time recruiting teachers of color, and could the city throw a modicum of the kind of energy and resources we do to attract businesses and developers into attracting teachers of color?

Could we have a city goal to increase the number of teachers of color as part of our goal to end systemic racism and increase equity in the city? Could we show those bright young educators that the city as a whole, as a moral institution is serious about this diversity business? Ok, and then we go about our anti-racist work.

Sure, maybe a dumb example, but maybe you get the idea.

(In fact, Gadfly thinks even bigger and dumber than that. Councilman Reynolds has schooled us several times on the reason why there are so few Blacks in Bethlehem — exclusionary employment policies of Bethlehem Steel in the old days. What about a plan to reverse that misguided policy, a plan to encourage more Black families to live here as a step toward having a more truly multi-cultural city, a paradigm of racial harmony? Ha! Calm down Gadfly, calm down. Get back on your meds. You have no credibility as it is.)

The Gadfly simply does not sense the *urgency* to do something meaningful as part of the national reckoning with race triggered by the murder of George Floyd.