

# It begins: City employees contact Councilman Callahan

The Bethlehem Gadfly City government, Ethics, Serious Issues December 1, 2019

 *Latest in a series of posts on Ethics and City Government* 

What do we know about where this controversy began?

In his November 25 press conference statement, Councilman Callahan states that for him this issue of possible unethical behavior by Alicia Miller Karner “came to [his] attention” in June of this year, June 2019 (he verbally corrected “June of last year” in oral delivery at the press conference) when 3 Department of Community and Economic Development employees — “2 current and 1 prior employee” — told him of AMK’s encouragement to “slow, delay, and stall all permits” to bolster her case for more staff.

(Gadfly thinks BGC might have said he was hearing complaints from developers too, so maybe there might be outside corroborative evidence as well.)

These people came to BGC in June 2019. He did not solicit them. It is not clear whether the contact was individual or group. It is not clear whether the contact was personal contact, phone, or email. It is not clear whether BGC had extended conversation with any of them in which he could determine how strong their claims were or that he was simply put on notice. It is not clear whether the contact was concerted, whether there was association among the employees, or whether the contacts were unrelated individual acts.

BGC apparently did not do any investigation of his own.

It is not clear what it is about the particular timing — June 2019 — that precipitated the simultaneity, the clustering of the contacts.

It is clear, however, that something was in the air in June 2019, for the [Lehigh Valley Ramblings blog](#) called attention to a “spike” in Zoning Hearing Board appeals because AMK was instructing staff to delay so she could request more staff. The blogger says, “When you hear it from three different people, it does not [strain credulity].”

So the same 3 employees seemed to contact the same 2 people at the same exact time to air their same complaint.

What would make the employees make such a complaint? Why is it such a big deal that it triggered what might seem a moral response? Perhaps their sense of general fair play, their conscience, their sense of professionalism. Perhaps, on the other hand, animus for some reason against AMK.

Why would the employees go “outside” City Hall to make their complaint (all indications so far are that they did not do so inside City Hall) to a blogger and a Councilman? Perhaps fear for their jobs. Perhaps fear of retribution. Perhaps because there is no system or procedure within City Hall for a person to bring forward such issues in a protected way.

Why would the employees go specifically to these two people — for instance, why not one of the other Councilpersons? Perhaps because the blogger has the reputation for dealing in inside information, has published this kind of whistleblowing, and has outed some situations successfully. Perhaps because BGC has a reputation for siding with the common person/underdog, for being a voice for them.

Who are these employees? We know one of them — Suzanne Borzak, former Zoning Officer — the person not a current employee, who was fired for officially vague reasons (personnel matters would, of course, be confidential) by AMK in January 2019, 6 months before the employee

contacts about the stalling tactics with *Lehigh Valley Ramblings* and BCG.

[“Bethlehem/s Popular Zoning Officer Forced to Resign, Lehigh Valley Ramblings, January 11, 2019.](#)

Why in June of 2019, 6 months after dismissal, would Borzak be involved? Perhaps still hurting from being terminated. Perhaps from a sense of doing no wrong. Perhaps because the issue of stalling was a reason for her termination. Perhaps because of her professionalism. Perhaps, on the other hand, animus against AMK for firing her.

So what are you thinking about in regard to this initial phase of the issue? What do you think of the Gadfly’s “perhaps’s”?

Gadfly — ever the problem solver — goes first to the need for employees to go “outside” City Hall with a complaint. Is there no trustworthy “inside” mechanism or system to handle such matters? No suggestion box? No ombudsman? No “whistleblower” procedure? If not, does this issue indicate the need for one in which there is the possibility that some satisfaction, some mediation, or some reconciliation occurs before the issue blows up in public?

*to be continued . . .*