

Councilwoman Van Wirt on the Polk Street Garage: “sane and sensible” to wait “until the demand pushes us to need a garage” (82)

The Bethlehem Gadfly Parking, Serious Issues July 8, 2019

(82nd in a series of posts on parking)

Let's pick up Friday's coverage of the BPA July 2 presentation on the proposed Polk Street Garage with the beginning of the discussion by Council members generated by the presentation.

Gadfly reminds you that a prime goal of the Gadfly project is to help you know your Council members when it comes to that all-important time to vote. So he encourages you to take advantage of the audio and video now available to you. Gain first-hand experience on how Council members are doing the job they were elected to do.

Councilwoman Van Wirt stepped up to the plate first and was, in fact, the most prominent questioner/commentator. In addition, and, most importantly, PVW asked some hard questions about, first, the need for the PSG, and, second, about the financial ramifications even though the BPA was not asking for a city-backed bond for construction.

Remember, one way or another, the PSG — at \$16-17m — will be built with our money.

Video of July 2 City Council meeting [at min. 30:20](#).

Below we'll break down PVW's share of the discussion period, but she crisply bundled up her major concerns about the PSG project for us at the very end of her time in this manner:

"I'm still needing to be shown the reason why things are the way they are, no variable rates, no really substantial increase in the monthly rates, and no reason why we can't use "Ruins" [the so-called Ruins lots].

So let's work through PVW's time on the firing line. The topics she raised included:

- The transparency and accessibility of BPA's decision-making process: the number of canceled public meetings in the past year; the amount of business conducted even with the canceled public meetings, perhaps in violation of the Sunshine Laws; the as-yet lack of response to the Mayor's request that meetings be held in the evening where they would be available to a greater swath of the public; and the need to record member votes for accountability. *Gadfly has attended BPA board meetings and has openly wondered in these pages where business is done, and, since followers might remember that Gadfly feels pretty sure he was lied to by BPA on a Right-to-Know request last year, BPA does not rate highly on his trust index. Nor, it seems, on PVW's.*
- PVW then moved to BPA's financial viability to do the PSG project, beginning with the existing low-cost parking contracts: "Why are we continuing to offer parking rates at \$65/month, when their own study that Desman did . . . had an average rate of \$118." Why are we raising meter rates and fines that affect the citizens of Bethlehem in order to subsidize these garage spots for favored interests? Why are we persisting in this practice, with some of the contracts locked in for 20 years? *Good questions.* Why are we not pricing these garage spots

according to the market? — *that's a simple and direct question.* The BPA exec responded that there are plans to increase the garage rates \$5 each in 2020 and 2024, *but that's hardly responsive if the market rate is \$118. And to Gadfly, the Desman answer — about playing catch up (?) and developing a program to base rates on market conditions and evaluating rates to balance supply and demand and concern about overpricing — was gobbledygook. Does BPA/Desman ever answer a direct question directly? Why are we not pricing these spots according to the market? Not answered.*

- PVW then asked about variable rate parking/variable demand parking, which was an idea floated by PVW and several members of the public in discussion of the Desman report in fall 2018 — and an idea picked up by the Mayor and recommended to the BPA for their consideration. To Gadfly's great surprise, BPA announced that two consultants were studying this proposal, *surprised because his questions about it at two BPA board meetings were met with silence. And — pow! — all of a sudden the idea has gone to consultants without any discussion at open Board meetings. Gadfly suspects that under Sunshine Law awarding a contract requires a vote at a public meeting. If so, that's a violation. Even if not, here's another indication that not all BPA business is done in the open. Which is bothersome. Gadfly will be cynical and expect that the consultant's reports will not recommend variable rate parking. My guess is that BPA is just going through the motions. I would love to be surprised in a different way.*
- PVW then went to the big money issue. Currently BPA has a liability of \$25m in taxpayer-backed bonds (NSG). A ballpark \$32m more is needed for PSG and the Walnut Street Garage, though no definite plans about whether to rebuild or renovate exist yet on WSG. (It is not clear yet whether funding for WSG will be by a private loan or taxpayer-supported bond.) But

that's a total of \$57m of debt, almost 75% of which could be directly on the taxpayer. So, PVW asks, suppose something "catastrophic" happens and you can't pay, which of the three would you not pay first? *To Gadfly, the answer was a bit more gobbledygook.* PVW felt the same way. PVW has to ask, "Can you put that in simpler terms for me?" Which really was kind of funny. *Another obfuscating non-answer to a simple direct question.* The answer seems to be that the three debts are on a par, and payment would go to whichever falls due first. *Gadfly gathers what PVW was getting at is that there's no guarantee that the City escapes financial peril just because the BPA is using a private loan for PSG.*

- After some questions about revenue at the NSG and revenue and timing in regard to the WSG, PVW asked some big, basic questions. She asked for rethinking. She asked for re-justifying. "Are the things that made you think this was a good idea fourteen years ago still valid?" In other words, are there now more economical options available? For instance, she suggested, the "Ruins lots" (potentially open space just north of the proposed PSG site) are now a totally viable place to put parkers. This large space is available, and the parking demand in South Bethlehem is soft. "There's too much risk; we need to wait until the demand pushes us to need a garage, and utilize the Ruins lots in the meantime. That to me seems a sane and sensible approach to parking in South Bethlehem." *This significant line of thought went unanswered by BPA (though it would be later by Councilman Callahan), for whom the momentum to build PSG has always seemed unbraked.*

Taking seriously Council's financial oversight responsibility, Councilwoman Van Wirt showed herself a conscientious fiscal watchdog through her skeptical questioning and commentary.