

Gadfly mayoral forum #5: Bethlehem: a tale of two cities?

The Bethlehem Gadfly Candidates for election, Election, Forum, Gadfly Forum April 13, 2021

🦋 *Latest in a series of posts on the Gadfly Forum* 🦋

The Mayoral candidate comparison chart

Another week, another Gadfly prompt from hell for our candidates!

I joked in the prompt audio that they're wishing I'd ask about something easy, like fixing potholes.

But Gadfly is up in the stratosphere. Literally. Gadfly asked everybody to look at Bethlehem from a high up perspective.



Inspired by Mark Iampietro's "Lookout yoga," Gadfly asked the candidates to take the proverbial 30,000ft. view of our town.

And what did they see? one city, one city with two complementary parts, one city with two different parts, one city with two contrary parts, one city with equal parts, two cities (or more)?

The candidates are good sports.

If you want to listen to my full prompt. click [here](#).

Dana Grubb

In 1924, the Hill to Hill Bridge was completed, a link between South, North and West Bethlehem; just a few years earlier, in 1917, the three



boroughs had been joined to become the City of Bethlehem. “A tale of two cities” is an apt description of Bethlehem, since the divisions between the South and its North and Westside neighbors run as deep. The physical barrier of the Lehigh River between the South and North sides reinforces the distinction between the sections. Vehicular bridges do little to close the gaps, and a proposed pedestrian bridge would likely be equally ineffective.

The question of how to unite the two halves of Bethlehem might be better approached from a query of how to breed respect and even admiration for each other between Bethlehem’s two distinct sections. To do that, an understanding of the city’s history and the foundations of each section is a necessary aid.

Founded by Moravian missionaries in the early to mid 18th century, Bethlehem’s original settlement was on what is now the Northside. As such, the Northside claims the city’s oldest lineage, and the distinction of heritage that comes along with that. As what would become the “downtown” center of shops and offices sprang up in the historic district, wealthy business owners began to site their homes and properties nearby, on the North side.

When Bethlehem Steel began as the Bethlehem Iron Works in 1857, immigrant workers of more than 60 ethnicities arrived to work at the plant. They established homes near the plant, so they could walk to work, and since the plant was on what is today the Southside of the Lehigh River, that was where they settled. The homes here put functionality ahead of fashion and were largely row and twin homes with small gardens and only a basic finish. They were also homes that the workers could afford.

Meanwhile, the upper management and executives at Bethlehem Steel had begun to build their homes on the city’s Westside. Both North and West were separated by the river from the noise and dirt inherent in the steel plant’s environs, and the wealthier upper managers and executives were able to purchase larger tracts of land and build more spacious, elegant homes. Once the Lehigh Valley Railroad came in, Bethlehem’s South side really did become the “wrong side of the tracks,” and the

division between rich and poor, management and workers, became deeper.

The establishment of Lehigh University in 1865 by Asa Packer raised the profile of the South side to some degree. Packer founded the University as an Engineering school to enhance and support the industrial growth of the Lehigh Valley. As time passed, the University added other disciplines to its syllabus, and students were added into the mix of residents living in the relatively inexpensive homes near the campus. Because most of these students were renters, not homeowners, that slant altered the demographics of the South side as well, not always to the good.

Once the steel plant closed, although the residents of the South side were no longer plant workers, their ethnic enclaves, which had sprung up from the mid-19th century on with the influx of the immigrant Steel workers, remained. A more diverse population evolved on the Southside because they could afford to purchase a home there, whereas the prices of North and West side real estate were often beyond their means. And so the divisions between South, North, and West sides were reinforced, with wealthier upper middle and upper class residents buying, building, and settling on the North and West sides, and moderate or low income families and renters, buying or rooming on the Southside.

With Bethlehem Steel gone, the opportunities for development, and re-use of that property, as well as the rest of the Southside, abounded. Developers see the Southside as the afterthought, the poor relation, who was ripe for the taking and exploiting because its residents were historically without political clout. The large-scale builders use any means to achieve their ends: in particular, they influence those who do have power to get on their side by making hefty campaign contributions, with little to no regard for what the residents of the Southside have wished for their community.

In addition, Lehigh University's gradual encroachment toward what once was a bustling commercial and retail district along Third and Fourth Streets, and the pressures that student housing needs bring to the residential neighborhoods, have created gentrification. This interest in development beyond what was imagined when the National Register

Historic Conservation District was established appears to be driven by return on investment and not by sound planning and concern for the fabric of the Southside.

City officials and developers must cherish and support the diverse population that is struggling to maintain a toehold in this section of the city, as real estate values are growing at an extraordinary rate. They should be upholding the enforcement of city ordinances that protect the charm and heritage of the South side and be listening to what residents want. Recent proposals coming before the Historic Conservation Commission for out of scale projects on the Southside prove that it is being treated like a country ripe for plunder: projects like these would gain little traction were they proposed for the North or West sides. The Southside deserves equal respect, recognition, and standing. Why? Because the attitude that the Southside is somehow inferior persists, handed down almost subconsciously through the decades, instead of celebrating the diversity and sense of community that has been brought to the Southside.

Are there solutions? Sure, but they aren't easy ones. In order to change people's perspectives and attitudes towards the Southside, value must be created for its vibrant, multi-cultural residents, businesses, and restaurants. That in itself will take legislation, education, communication, and time. Additionally, the current trend of development and big money will need to be met head on, and it's going to take a Mayor, City Council, and community to demand responsible growth. Electing a Mayor who will stand his ground on development issues while seeking inclusivity and respect for a diverse community will be a step in the right direction and help Bethlehem live "a tale of one city."

J. William Reynolds

Ed,

When we are talking about the future of our city, Touchstone Theatre's Festival Unbound was a fantastic place for you to start this prompt. The conversations at Touchstone about American (and our community's) identity were inspiring, thought provoking, and thrilling. One of my favorite things about the events was the emphasis placed on one's individual and group experience in the way history is viewed.



When we look at our city's history, it is clear to anyone who has ever lived or visited that our past is rich and vibrant. We deservedly spend a lot of time discussing all of the great aspects of our history.

The community institutions, the architecture, the legacy of an American industrial titan in Bethlehem Steel, and a high quality of life in our neighborhoods that has spanned generations. Our history is not perfect, though, and it needs to be discussed in relation to inequities in 2021.

What are a few parts of our history that we aren't quite as proud of?

- The community policy on restricting most non-Moravians from living in Bethlehem for over 100 years.
- Bethlehem Steel's hiring policies limiting the amount of African American employees and families in Bethlehem (one of the reasons we have a significantly lower African American population than Easton or Allentown).
- The deliberate location of public housing in the corners and the outskirts of our city creating systemic access issues including economic and educational opportunities.

These are but a few historical examples of public and private actions that helped create the structure of the Bethlehem that we know. They must be mentioned when we start talking about where people live in our city, why they live there, and what opportunities are available to people based on where they live. None of those decisions were made by the leaders of our community in recent years. It is our responsibility, however, to work systemically to fix them.

South Bethlehem is a resource rich area in many ways but is also negatively affected by some systemic issues. Affordable housing availability, economic, recreational, transportation, and technological opportunities are all areas that historically have been unequal in our community. City government, our non-profit community, and service providers have taken several steps to start to try to improve the systemic delivery of these services.

One example is the collective effort that has been started to tackle the issue of affordable housing. The new student overlay district in south Bethlehem is a good first step in attempting to limit the skyrocketing incentives of buying a property to turn it into student housing. It is also vital that the City of Bethlehem establishes an Affordable Housing Trust Fund and works with our non-profit partners. This work needs to include both the creation of new affordable housing and the rehabilitation of current housing to make it more affordable for our families.

Another example is our recent work on trying to expand high speed internet to all of our residents. We saw the influence of a lack of internet service on many of our most vulnerable populations during the pandemic. This is a structural issue that we must fix as a community. I am hopeful that we can use a portion of our stimulus funds to invest in this area (as the legislation specifically allows for).

Everything we do as a community has to be rooted in the idea of equity. I am proud that our Climate Action Plan, Northside 2027, and our Connecting Bethlehem Communications Initiative all include equity as the most important organizing principle. As more development occurs in every area of our city, we need to make sure that new investment is accomplishing community goals that relate to affordable housing, sustainability, and respecting our architectural history.

Bethlehem can, in fact, be “one” city. We can continue to work to develop systems that work for everyone. We have started to make progress on a structural level, but there is a lot more work to be done. That work starts with understanding that the identity we have as a community is one based on diversity, respect, and inclusion. There is not one important neighborhood. There isn’t one history. Most importantly,

there isn't one identity in our city. It doesn't matter if you were born here or not. The only thing that matters is that we continue to build a city where everyone is valued, accepted, supported, and heard. That is the Bethlehem we need to be.

Residents are welcome to fashion reflections on candidate comments, sending them to ejg1@lehigh.edu. On Gadfly we seek the good conversation that builds community, so please be courteous at all times. Gadfly retains the right to abridge and to edit your reflections and to decline posts that are repetitive or that contain personal attacks. Gadfly will publish resident reflections on the week's Forum at noon on Friday.