

Council decides to move forward now on the Parking Authority proposal to increase fines

The Bethlehem Gadfly Parking, Serious Issues October 17, 2019

(132nd in a series of posts on parking)

For the past half-dozen or so posts in the parking thread (see [“parking”](#) under Topics on the sidebar), we have focused on the Bethlehem Parking Authority proposal to raise the penalties in the fine structure. Meter rates increased January 1 by authority of the Mayor but the fines, which are under the authority of Council, were not raised, rendering the fines an ineffective deterrent in controlling curbside turnover. Council withheld its permission to get more information on BPA funding of the Polk Street Garage and to encourage the BPA study of variable rate parking.

The Council Public Safety Committee recently voted 2-1 to hold off on the proposed fine increases pending consultation with BPA on a Councilwoman Van Wirt idea to do a pilot study of a plan to provide free parking for a limited period but to substantially increase the fine structure, well over what the BPA has proposed.

Last Tuesday committee action was before the full Council, and it was not accepted by a 5-2 vote. The original BPA proposal will now be before Council at its next meeting.

Gadfly thought the discussion a good one and will provide video and commentary in the next post in this series.

Sara Satullo, [“It looks like Bethlehem’s parking fines are going up.”](#)
[lehighvalleylive.com.](#), October 16, 2019.

Nearly a year after the city parking authority first requested an increase, it appears Bethlehem City Council is poised to back hiking the city's parking fines to \$15. A majority of city council voted Tuesday night to override its public safety committee's recommendation to hold off on the Bethlehem Parking Authority's pitch to increase fines by \$5. The two councilwoman who voted Oct. 1 to wait on hiking the fines — Olga Negron and Dr. Paige Van Wirt — opposed the motion.

On Oct. 1, the authority was back before council's public safety committee to again hash out why the authority needs to hike fines to deter parking violations. Currently, it costs \$10 a day to park in a city garage, so people are willing to roll the dice, not feed the meters and risk a \$10 ticket, Livingston has said. "You are saving \$2 by breaking the law," said Bryan Callahan, who is the parking authority liaison.

Callahan made a motion Tuesday night to release the public safety committee from considering the fine increases. That motion passed 5-2 and then council voted along the same lines to bring the fine hike up for first reading at the council meeting Nov. 6. Negron and Van Wirt also opposed that measure.

A majority of council members expressed broad support for Van Wirt's suggestion that the authority pilot offering free parking in concert with more expensive parking fines — like \$40 or \$50 for overstaying time limits — in hopes of putting more shoppers on the streets of the Historic District and Southside. But they didn't wish to link approving the higher fines with the enactment of a pilot, which some noted could take time to develop." I don't think there's a reason we can't do both of these things," Councilman J. William Reynolds said.

The unique structure of the city's parking authority — the mayor approves meter rates, council approves parking fines and the authority's board sets the garage rates — creates a power struggle each time council is asked to hike the cost of violations. It is one of the only times council gets to weigh in on the authority's finances and parking policies.

On Tuesday night, Van Wirt said when she didn't support the fine increase when it was before the committee she wanted the authority to consider what is best for the people of Bethlehem, the folks that park in the city and the businesses of Bethlehem when it makes structural changes. She wants to have that conversation now with the authority's board in hopes of the pilot occurring soon.

Callahan argued the authority needs clarity on the fine increases and that there's a major problem with parking turnover on Main Street where he said it is hard to find a spot. Businesses don't want meters tied up with the same parkers all day, they want constant turn over, he said. "It is hurting downtown businesses with the meter fee the way it is," Callahan said.

Van Wirt emphasized that the pilot she is proposing would keep meters turning over and perhaps convince some, who avoid the area after a bad experience with the parking authority, to come back downtown. "It is a model," she said. "It is well studied. It is effective."

[Nicole Radzievich, "Will parking fines go up in Bethlehem? The hike has been stalled for a year, but is now making some headway." Morning Call, October 16, 2019.](#)

A proposed parking fine hike, which has been stalled in committee for a year, is making some headway on Bethlehem City Council. Council voted 5-2 Tuesday to take the proposal out of committee and vote on it next month, bypassing the recommendation of its public safety committee. Earlier this month, the committee decided to postpone the issue until there could be a pilot study on whether to offer free parking in the downtowns for a limited amount of time.

While council members still appeared open to the pilot program, a majority indicated that it doesn't change the fact that fines, now at \$10 for a meter violation, are too low to deter people from parking illegally. The current meter fine is the same cost as all-day parking in the garage.

The goal is to encourage long-term visitors to park in the garage, freeing up the \$1.50-an-hour meters for visitors on shorter trips. “It’s been on the table and discussed for almost a year now,” City Councilman Bryan Callahan said. “At some point, we have to let the parking authority know where we stand on this.”

Van Wirt said she still hopes that the parking authority will give the pilot program serious consideration. The idea would be to offer free parking on selected downtown areas — such as Main and Broad streets on the North Side and Third Street on the South Side — for two or three hours. Violators would be ticketed at a much higher rate — perhaps \$30 or \$40. She said other communities offered similar programs. She said she wants the authority to consider the impact of its financial decisions on visitors to the downtown and businesses, not just its bottom line.

Comparing the first six months of last year and this year, the number of meter violations jumped by 27% to 15,700 tickets. Overall tickets during that time rose by 7% to 41,642. From 2014-2018, the parking tickets increased from 22,940 to 78,000 — a 240% increase.