

Gadfly invites you to sit in the Mayor's chair

The Bethlehem Gadfly City government May 21, 2020

 *Latest in a series of posts on City Government* 

Video: City Council meeting May 19
begin min. 21:10

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“Sometimes I get the feeling that the City doesn’t consider farmer’s markets
an essential partner in the supply chain for food.”
Mary Toulouse

“It’s really a shame to hear members of the group feeling so frustrated
with the lack of support from the Administration.”
Councilwoman Olga Negron

Here’s one for you to chew on.

The Bethlehem Rose Garden Farmers’ Market is a respected, popular, all-volunteer local institution run by MANA, the Mount Airy Neighborhood Association. Mary Toulouse is MANA president and manager of the farmers’ market.

At City Council Tuesday, approval of a permit for the farmers’ market was on the agenda. Toulouse made a strong report on the market’s activities even though approval of the permit itself was never in doubt.

Her strong report concluded, however, with a lament “that the City doesn’t consider farmer’s markets an essential partner in the supply chain for food,” the wish that the City would lend a “helping hand once in a while” (little things like showcasing the farmers’ markets on the web site), and hope for a waiver of fees totaling over a \$1000 for the season for necessary police barricades for necessary crowd control.

All in Toulouse’s typical polite, respectful, yet forceful style.

Now Gadfly has often asked you to play Council member. He enjoys that himself. It's a fun part of being a Gadfly. And it helps us understand what it takes to be the kind of person we vote for.

This time he asks you to play Mayor.

You are the steward of our tax money. City services cost money. There is an established, legislative fee structure for certain City services. MANA is a worthy organization. But there are dozens, maybe hundreds of worthy non-profit organizations in the city. How do you justify waiving fees for one and not others? And, since inevitably the City can not do everything for every worthy non-profit organization, the fee might be seen as a kind of necessary control valve on requests rather than just a nasty revenue generator. (You would probably want to remind yourself how much revenue such fees generate. A lot? A little? Does anyone know where to find that line on the budget?)

Listen to Toulouse's "case": MANA has established rules for social distancing; they have lined up 12 vendors of essential products; their meat supply comes from local sources not from industrial plants where atrocious conditions abound; they will keep a local egg farmer from having to kill his chickens; they are supporting small, local, independent farmers, many of whom locally and nationally have stopped production or are on the brink of doing so; they are picking up the slack in the food supply chain, the signs of whose disruption are plainly evident.

The case for the waiver is emotionally strong. It feels like it might be easy for you to say yes. But you remember that — to cite just one example with which Gadfly is familiar — you had a request last year to waive fees associated with a block party in a model neighborhood. And you remember that such requests are worthy too. O, if you could only keep your waiver quiet. But word gets around.

Then, adding to your headache, Councilwoman Negron supports the waiver, reminding you that an established group like ArtsQuest tried a farmers' market several years ago and couldn't pull off what this volunteer group has done so well. "It's an asset to our city, to the entire city," says the Councilwoman, "we should be taking care of it. . . . I don't understand. It's like we are working backwards." And the Councilwoman widens the scope of her point beyond MANA: "I really hope the

Administration takes a closer look at what this group and others are doing and facilitates what they are doing and looks at it in a different way.” She seems to be calling for a whole new look at this fee structure and to whom it applies.

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(Gadfly has a secret. Is anybody listening? Probably doesn't matter. It was so long ago that everybody concerned is probably dead except Gadfly. But when he was a Little League president a century ago, these kinds of “minor” requests for services were done sub rosa for a case of beer. Ahh, the good old days of the Wild West.)

So, if Mayor, what would you do about a waiver?

(Ms. Toulouse raised another but associated point in her presentation, and we'll look at that next.)

The Bethlehem Gadfly