

How is the defunding wind blowing on City Council?

The Bethlehem Gadfly Police August 17, 2020

 *Latest in a series of posts about the Bethlehem Police* 

Nobody on Council has called for the abolishment or defunding of the police dept.

Council President Waldron, Public Safety Committee, 8/11

There was talk about defunding the police department. And I just want to clarify that.

Councilman Callahan, Public Safety Committee, 8/11

The idea of defunding police departments is nationally a “hot” one.

How is City Council leaning?

First, Gadfly asks us again to be sure we define the term. “Defund the police” needs an agreed upon understanding, especially with people new to the controversy and the conversation, if meaningful discussion is to have any chance at all.

“Defund the police” is not synonymous with “Eliminate the police” (which, yes, some people advocate).

Not.

And nobody on Council is advocating elimination of the police.

Public Safety Committee chair Colon recognized the problem with the term “defund the police” at the very top of the August 11 meeting, but Gadfly feels he may have compounded confusion by indicating the term can pretty much mean what the person using it wants:

Audio files are not available in this archive.

No, it can’t mean what any one wants it to mean.

It must mean what the people who coined it meant it to mean.

It must mean what it is.

To say otherwise is to suggest that it has no meaning.

“Defunding the police” has a clear definition.

It would have been much more helpful if Chair Colon had said that during this meeting “defund the police” will be used in its proper meaning of “a slogan that supports divesting funds from police departments and reallocating them to non-policing forms of public safety and community support, such as social services, youth services, housing, education, healthcare and other community resources.” (good ol’ Wikipedia)

And defunding the police is not a harebrained idea. Gadfly has in these pages already explored with you its fruitful existence in such places as Eugene and St. Petersburg.

But defunding is politically hot. Maybe even a kind of third rail. Which way is the City leaning? Which way is Council leaning?

At last week’s meeting, Council president Waldron said nobody had *called for* defunding, to which Councilman Callahan immediately clarified that there was *talk* of such.

Prez Waldron may be *technically* right, but let’s look a bit more closely at some of the statements Council members have made, especially Councilman Reynolds.

Councilman Callahan seems to have been referring to statements by Councilman Reynolds. Councilman Reynolds speaks forcefully — we all know he booms! I want to salute when he talks! — and Gadfly remembers the definite feeling that he was envisioning the possibility of defunding this very year in urging space for discussion before the November/December budget season commenced. At the July 7 City Council meeting JWR urged passage that night of his resolution with Councilwoman Crampsie Smith in words that indicated there was no time to waste: he “didn’t want to wait to do this resolution . . . because the biggest part of this in [his] mind [was] creating the public pressure

on the City to change.” Sure sounded like the possibility of defunding to me and, Gadfly thinks, to Councilman Callahan.

At the June 16 City Council meeting, JWR said, “the [residents of the] city want us to have a conversation about how are we spending this money in public safety, not necessarily reducing the money but whether or not it does make sense to allocate resources other ways.” Gadfly heard the possibility of defunding.

At last week’s Public Safety meeting. JWR introduced the valuable 1-10 analogy, with 10 the police department where all of the problems eventually end up after breakdowns in the 9 other areas. He broadened our vision to the need for reallocating resources outside the police department, or at least that’s the way Gadfly heard him in comments like this: “It means spending our time and allocating our resources as a city and a community,” he said, “in a way that recognizes the responsibility of people in positions of authority to improve 1 through 10” [and not just 10]. Gadfly heard the possibility of defunding.

Now there’s a nuance here possibly. On June 16, JWR did say twice that the focus was on allocating funds “within” the police department — and that doesn’t sound strictly as defunding.

Now JWR’s resolution colleague Councilwoman Crampsie Smith seems to take a firm position against defunding. She calls for outside funding to enhance the police department and/or re-allocating existing funds within the department.

I have never myself meant taking funds away [from the police department] nor will I. . . . I have recommended looking for grants . . . for additional mental health specialists. . . . (8/4)

No one on Bethlehem City Council ever said they want to or will eliminate our police department. . . . I certainly do not agree with any group that calls for the elimination of the police. I do feel that we need to work together as a community to be anti-racist. I also feel that we need to insure that we use funds within the police department to make sure that our police and community have the best training and resources available to them. (8/11)

Councilman Callahan has an equally firm, an adamant position against defunding:

There was some talk a couple weeks ago about defunding the police department. I in no way would ever support anything like that. Defunding means taking away and removing funds from, and I think if we do anything, as Councilwoman Grace Crampsie Smith said, we have to have more training for the police officers. (8/11)

Gadfly doesn't believe that Councilfolk Colon, Negron, Van Wirt, or Waldron have made explicit statements one way or the other about defunding the police.

Gadfly would hope all Council members would have an open mind about the notion of defunding the police.

He would hope that even Council members Crampsie Smith and Callahan would exhibit an open mind until they vouch for their significant study of model defunding programs and articulate the reasons for their lack of support. And GCS must know that Police Chiefs in some places have favored such programs, even initiated them, and have not been dragged kicking and screaming into them.

Proclaiming "I in no way would ever support anything like that" without undertaking careful study and engaging in open discussion with proponents of defunding would seem an intellectually disagreeable position.

(Is it a bridge too far to imagine an informational presentation on such model defunding programs for the City Administration, the Council, the Police Department, and the general public?)

It is curious to Gadfly that such firm positions would be announced before community engagement engages. Are we foreclosing the possibility that after presentations, examination, study, discussion the community might *want* to defund the police? What then? There seems to be a contradiction here.