

# Gadfly mayoral forum #2: development

[The Bethlehem Gadfly](#) [Candidates for election](#), [Election](#), [Forum](#), [Gadfly Forum](#) March 22, 2021

 Latest in a series of posts on the Gadfly Forum 

## [The Mayoral candidate comparison chart](#)

Tip o' the hat to candidates Reynolds and Grubb for helping us better understand their views, positions, and minds so that we can become better voters.

The candidate responses are presented in reverse alphabetical order this time.

-----

### **The prompt:**

*For 50 years as a writing teacher, I would say to students that the first thing you need to do is identify and imagine your audience. You know that you would give a different set of remarks to senior citizens in the commons room of a high-rise than you would to a lunch meeting of the Rotary. Last time I gave you a scenario. I asked you to imagine your audience as an anguished Facebooker who said, "They raised taxes in the middle of a pandemic?!" This time I would like you to imagine the scenario of addressing a highly emotional guy who needs to be "talked down," a guy who during the current administration has witnessed and participated in such big "development" controversies as the Armory, Martin Tower, and 306 S. New, as well as such smaller ones as 2 W. Market, 1<sup>st</sup> Terrace, and 11-15 W. Garrison. Imagine talking directly to a guy who is a bit out of control, whose voice is quavering slightly, who may be prone to exaggeration. Have some serious fun doing this. How would you talk this guy you hear below in a perhaps not so fictional a scenario down into trusting your administration?*

-----

*the scene:*

— *Steelworkers Hall, a chilly March night, not much heat in the hall*

— a concerned resident steps to the microphone, generating some heat

Dana, Willie :

Thank you for your willingness to take on the tough job of mayor. And thank you for coming here to talk with us about your views on a variety of topics.

I have to tell you right off that my main concern is with the way development has been going lately. I think I speak for many in that regard. I see some people nodding their heads.

My vote is going to depend on what I hear from you on this issue.

Let me try to explain the dark place I'm coming from by remembering three specific moments:

- First, when I picked up the morning paper at breakfast one day and saw that Wind Creek announced plans for a mammoth waterpark in historic Machine Shop #2. I lost my appetite. Yes, don't laugh, I see you smiling, I did, I truly did. People were celebrating this as an economic godsend, but to me it felt so egregiously out of place to our town's character and, well, brand, that I wrote a 6-word story on my napkin: "Southside: Stacks, Steeples, and (Water) Slides." (*Telling a story in 6 words, an interesting exercise, the most famous is Ernest Hemingway's "For sale: baby shoes, never worn."*) It felt like we were powerless. Rich *arriviste* Wind Creek could do whatever it wanted there.
- Second, when Louis James, President of the South Bethlehem Historical Society, delivered a letter *imploring* (figuratively begging) the Mayor and City Council to consider the negative effects that development, that economic progress has had on the residents of South Bethlehem. A letter so polite, so diplomatic it was almost embarrassing. David tugging at the shirttails of Goliath. How was it that we went so far yet overlooked this sentiment in our community?
- Third, when, compelled by an "existential threat" to their neighborhood, a group of residents came to the Town Hall podium turned soap box to announce the formation of "Bethlehem Residents for Responsible Development." Residents forced to mobilize to fight

for the quality of their lives. How did it come to this? We have heard high-ranking City representatives talk of the danger of driving developers away. In this case we drove a Black family away from an ideal neighborhood, a neighborhood “racially and ethnically diverse, mixed income, stable, integrated, a healthy neighborhood of single-family homeowners and working-class renters, the kind of neighborhood where people know each other by name, shovel each other’s walks, look after each other’s kids, look out for each other.” How could we be so stupid?

The common denominator here is a feeling that outside forces, that economic forces are controlling our destiny, driving our decisions, encroaching on our neighborhoods.

I’ve gotta tell you, I’ve had this same feeling quite recently.

- a developer was told 12 stories was too high, and, without so much as an acknowledgment of that fact, he came back the next meeting with a plan for 13
- a developer lectured a caller — yes, a caller — a caller urging a Commission to stick to its guidelines, lectured that caller on the reality that “Economics is a huge factor in development today, if you [the Commission] say no, we can’t do it, it will never get developed, just pointing out facts here, it’s not going to happen.”

What did I hear? Entitlement. Condescension. Cocksurety. Power.

Who’s in charge, guys? The City or the developers?

It sometimes feels like we have nothing to do but follow the money.

It sometimes feels we do nothing but follow the money.

Now the recent regulation of student housing around Lehigh feels like a step in the right direction.

Tell us, how do you see the relationship between the City and developers? How will your administrations maintain a proper balance between our rights and needs and theirs?

Sorry, I took so much time. But I had to get this off my chest. Thank you.

*Thanks for your service, and your willingness to serve.*

-----

## **J. William Reynolds**

Bethlehem has maintained its high quality of life because of the public and private economic investment we have seen over the past 25 years. Billions of dollars of investment have rebuilt our economy, expanded our tax base and provided jobs to thousands of our residents. Without that investment, we would be facing the very difficult financial decisions that most other cities have had to face. Without that economic growth, we would not be able to provide the high quality services that our residents expect and deserve. We may have even had to consider selling off our capital assets such as our water system. When the Steel closed, our public and private economy took a huge blow. It knocked us down, but we recovered thanks to the public and private sector working together to rebuild our city.



As we look at future development, we need to balance a series of interests. Does the project enhance the quality of life in Bethlehem? Where appropriate, does the project respect the history of our city? Does the project help achieve our goals of increasing affordable housing? Does the project need economic incentives to happen? Does the project help our small business community? These are just a few of the considerations and questions our community must collectively face as we continue to economically revitalize our city.

In order to redevelop the former Bethlehem Steel site, the largest brownfield in America, we needed to offer economic incentives. The cost was simply too high for anyone to take on without incentives. A question that arises every year is “Are the incentives needed?” A few years ago, with that question in mind, I created our Financial Accountability Incentive Reporting (F.A.I.R.) ordinance. Every year our Community and Economic Development releases a report on the effectiveness of our

current economic incentives. F.A.I.R. looks to quantify the tax revenue and jobs that our incentives help to create on an annual basis. This is important information as we consider where to offer economic incentives in the future. We also must target our incentives towards community priorities (for example, a new grocery store tenant to replace Ahart's in South Bethlehem as has been discussed this week).

As new development occurs, we must do everything we can to keep housing affordable for everyone in our community. Councilwoman Crampsie Smith and I have been working on an Affordable Housing Task Force with non-profit leaders, community service providers, and City staff to study the issue and offer potential policy recommendations. We have an upcoming Community Development Committee meeting (3/23) where we will discuss some potential actions the City can take in the short and long term (the student overlay district in South Bethlehem is a good first step, but there must be many more). A version of this Task Force must become a permanent structure in our community as the issue of affordable housing is affecting more and more Bethlehem families every year.

While the redevelopment and revitalization of our community has unquestionably been positive, there have been development mistakes in Bethlehem. Closing Broad Street, the Rooney Building on the South Side, and other examples of urban renewal are a few of the projects that I bet City leaders of the 1970s wished they had back. During my time on City Council, I have been impressed with the work of our Zoning Hearing Board, Planning Commission, and Planning Department in making sure we avoid the mistakes of previous eras. There are still, of course, moments when development ideas need to be altered to fit into the context of appropriate development for our community. Recently, a proposal to put a 135-foot-high building on S. New Street (40 feet higher than the 3<sup>rd</sup> and New building across the street) came before the Historic Conservation Commission. Thankfully, the Historic Conservation Commission encouraged the applicant to come down in height. Their strong feelings on the issue were almost certainly going to be mirrored by the Planning Commission and City Council when faced with the same opportunity to weigh in on a building that was 135 feet high. There are multiple governmental entities that publicly discuss, consider, and decide if a project is appropriate and congruent with the historical

context, priorities, and goals of our community. This system of checks and balances is essential if we are going to continue to produce high quality development projects.

When a project comes before the Planning Commission, Zoning Hearing Board, etc., future Administrations may be able to do a more effective job of communicating City Hall priorities as they relate to the project. How does the project reflect city planning goals? What did the Planning Department push for that they didn't get? Why weren't those potential changes included in the final project? What are the environmental challenges that the developer is facing with this project that influence the final design? Often times, it is challenging to understand the various factors that affect the practicalities of a project. Explaining those various moving parts in a complicated development project should be a priority for City Hall moving forward.

We want people to invest in our city. There are still hundreds of acres of the Bethlehem Steel brownfields that need to be redeveloped. We have to work with those who want to invest in our city while balancing the various priorities of our community. It is a delicate balance and one that the City has maintained since the closing of the Steel. It is also one that we must continue if we are going to keep rebuilding and revitalizing our city.

-----  
**Dana Grubb**



Dear Gadfly,

Make no mistake about it, we need development to help grow the tax base in Bethlehem. It helps with maintaining a reasonable tax rate so that the real estate tax burden doesn't overwhelm property owners, particularly homeowners. However, development must be compatible and appropriate for the neighborhoods and areas in which it takes place.

Some background first.

Although my focus as a city employee and administrator came more on the community development side, my single greatest role probably came during my participation as a lead negotiator with Bethlehem Steel on Tax Increment Financing negotiations and obtaining a HUD Section 108 Loan. Both have been used to create the SteelStacks campus, make renovations to the Stock House Visitors Center, adapt the Hoover-Mason Trestle and construct the Levitt Pavillon, expand adjacent parking lots, build the Southside Greenway, and complete the construction of the public road system and the installation of public infrastructure.

In addition, alongside City Councilman Mike Schweder, City Historic Officer Christine Ussler, representatives from the Pennsylvania Historical & Museum Commission, and City lawyers, I participated in crafting the ordinance that created the South Bethlehem Historic Conservation District, which is now a National Register Historic District.

As the city's Grants Administrator, I provided oversight on the CDBG-funded Facade Improvement Program and the Fund for Revitalization and Economic Development, and administered the revolving loan fund to which repayments were made.

So, my work experience on the economic development side of city government is extensive.

It is frustrating to watch as development proposals are embraced by City administrations at the expense of quality of life for residents, in detriment to the charm and ambience of our neighborhoods and business districts, and in direct contradiction of City ordinances.

Developers may see the city's Southside Conservation District as an opportunity to be taken advantage of; additionally, the Southside District does not seem to be as highly-respected as is the Bethlehem Historic District on the Northside.

I have attended live and virtual meetings of the Historic Conservation Commission to reinforce what I know to be the intent of the Ordinance that created this particular National Register Historic District. I am amazed at the ways in which proposals for demolition of historic properties and for the construction of tall buildings have become routine. I would think these developers conduct their due diligence so that they

understand the zoning and preservation requirements. Yet they still make outlandish proposals, often with a compromise in the back of their minds that still doesn't comply with City ordinances.

They seem to think that the Secretary of the Interior's Guidelines are aspirational but not applicable. They are wrong. Scale, height, and mass of new development are relevant. The continuity of a streetscape matters. And, yes, development can still take place that respects the already existing built environment.

So, as Mayor how will I handle these situations?

In my administration, proposed projects will stand on their own merit, not the size of campaign contributions or any other potential inducements.

I am not soliciting nor am I accepting campaign contributions from the large developers who dominate Bethlehem's development scene.

As a City Councilman, my opponent has made it a habit of accepting these kinds of contributions: based on the available data from his campaign finance reports, those contributions totaled more than \$26,000 as of the end of 2020.

As Mayor, when a proposed project is brought to my attention, I will have a series of questions and checklist for the developers of those projects:

1. How will your project benefit Bethlehem and the neighborhood in which you're locating?
2. Have you met with the surrounding residents and property owners? How do they feel about your project?
3. How many and what variances will you be seeking? Are you in compliance with all city ordinances?
4. What if any assistance do you need from City Hall?
5. Are your taxes current on all of the real estate that you own in Bethlehem? Are your properties in good condition and code compliant? We want to make sure that you are a responsible property owner.



6. What are the parking needs for your project, and how will they be addressed? Are you stressing an already existing short supply of parking?
7. What is the environmental impact of any proposed demolition and/or the actual project?

The informed answers to these questions will determine the level of support that a developer receives from my administration.

The attitude surrounding development needs to be changed in Bethlehem. Yes, economics are a part of the development equation, but that must not come at the expense of quality of life for Bethlehem residents, and certainly not as a result of compromising city ordinances.

Developers will find me a willing partner as Mayor if they engage residents and others affected by their proposals, are a good citizen of the community, and show respect for what already exists.

This city can do better, it must do better, and so I ask the voters to believe that it can be better and to “Believe in a Better Bethlehem.”

-----

*Residents are welcome to fashion reflections on candidate comments, sending them to [ejg1@lehigh.edu](mailto: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.*