

Councilman Callahan as legislator

[The Bethlehem Gadfly](#) [Budget](#), [Candidates for election](#), [City government](#) February 16, 2021

 *Latest in a series of posts on candidates for election* 

Community Development Committee Meeting Tuesday, February 09, 2021 Proposed Ordinances related to Third-Party Inspections

Last Tuesday Council's Community Development Committee held a meeting on ordinances proposed by Councilman Callahan relating to Third-Party inspections.

Councilwoman Van Wirt chairs the committee; other members are Councilman Reynolds and Councilwoman Crampsie Smith.

Third-party inspections.

Yawn, you are saying, yawn.

But this meeting touches on three important subjects: the quality of City services, the City budget, and the upcoming election.

Gadfly would like you to think about all three subjects as you contemplate this post, but especially the last — the upcoming election.

Literally as he was writing this, Gadfly learned that **Councilman Callahan** will not be running for Mayor but for re-election to his third term on Council.

One of Gadfly's most basic goals has been to help you have the information that you need to vote in the most informed way possible.

This is Councilman Callahan's project.

We should be paying attention to such things as we consider spending our votes (though, at the moment, it looks like 4 candidates for 4 slots — no competition).

Take some time to witness him on center stage, in action, as it were, proposing legislation, one of the main jobs of a councilman. You can listen to him on the meeting video [here](#).

Gadfly will provide some audio clips with summaries from the meeting below, but followers know that he always advises that you go to the primary source yourself and form your own opinions before he comments.

He will only say now that this meeting shows a pattern in the way Councilman Callahan works that he has seen before, and he wonders if you do too.

Councilman Callahan's proposal *cum* rationale (20 mins.):

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The City employs building inspectors. Councilman Callahan has heard complaints from both commercial entities as well as “mom and pops” of undue delays getting necessary building inspections. His purpose is to streamline the permit process as well as save money by using outside inspectors. This year our taxes went up 5%, we cut 4 public safety positions, etc. The hard budget choices will continue next year. We currently use our in-house inspectors as well as a third-party inspector for acute needs. Councilman Callahan has learned that many other surrounding towns simply use the third-party inspectors. If we did that, he argues, we could cut our budgeted inspectors, save money, and provide better service. Councilman Callahan notes that the Department of Community and Economic Development is the only City department that hasn't been cut recently — in fact, it has grown. We have 8-10 inspectors now, and something is wrong in the way our system is operating. Councilman Callahan is not asking for immediate change but for the City to request bids from third-parties so that we can determine if a new system would be good for us. He outlines the potential benefits of replacing in-house inspectors with third-party inspectors, such as more efficiency because of more sophisticated technology. Bottom line: a win/win of cutting payroll while gaining more efficient services.

Something's not working now, he argues, and cost-savings will be substantial.

DCED Director Karner's initial response to Councilman Callahan's proposal (3 mins.):

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Director Karner agrees that there is some technology desiderata while describing what they do have now in the way of technology, but she categorically rejects the anecdotal evidence of delays in the inspection process. These complaints have not come to her attention, and if and when such problems are brought to her, they are/will be addressed immediately.

Further response from Director Karner (5 mins.):

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In response to probes by Councilwoman Crampsie Smith, Director Karner adds that the use of a third-party inspector would result in loss of control in front of a magistrate, that the inspectors are revenue-neutral, and that City inspectors do a much more comprehensive inspection than the third-partyers.

Response from Councilman Reynolds (5 mins.):

Councilman Reynolds argues that there would not be a financial savings as indicated by Councilman Callahan (in ways ex-English-teacher Gadfly couldn't follow!) and that he could not be in favor of the proposal until all the questions/objections raised by Director Karner were satisfied.

Councilman Callahan and Director Karner interact (36 mins.):

Councilman Callahan questions Director Karner for a long time. The Councilman is especially interested in getting some data from the Director in written form. The Director makes two points, that third-party inspectors would not save the taxpayer money (there would be a "remarkable difference" in cost) and that the data he seeks about time lag in inspections will not give the Councilman the information that he is

looking for (“it will not show why things are delayed”). Director Karner suggests that Councilman Callahan take up any complaints about delay with the permit coordinator and reminds him of a complaint in the past that turned out to be “unfounded,” turned out to be a “lie.” “I am not going to allow you to sit there and continue to make these accusations that we have these long delays.”

Councilpeople Crampsie Smith (1 min.) and Reynolds (2 mins.) respond to the Callahan/Karner dialog:

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Councilwoman Crampsie Smith wonders about simply a policy to deal with complaints, starting with the department head and going up to the mayor rather than dealing with these kinds of things at Council. Councilman Reynolds says that it’s obvious we are not ready to vote on Councilman Callahan’s proposal, that there are questions to be answered, that this meeting is not the most “productive” way to get answers to those questions, and that the proposal should be revisited when Councilman Callahan has the answers to his questions.

Chair Van Wirt make suggestions to Councilman Callahan (5 mins.):

Councilwoman Van Wirt, as chair of the Committee, indicates that a lot has been covered, tries to move Councilman Callahan along by suggesting that he put his thoughts in writing and take time “away from this committee” to pull things together. Councilman Callahan summarizes what he’s looking for and tasks chair Van Wirt for being “unfair” and “stifling” his desire to get information when the meeting has only gone on one hour and twenty minutes.

Chair Van Wirt wraps up the meeting (4 mins.):

Councilwoman Van Wirt pushes back strongly to Councilman Callahan’s proposal. There are “irrelevancies” in the questions he was asking. This is “a solution in search of a problem.” She has seen no evidence of complaints. Until there is a “clear need” for a different way of doing things, the current way (*a la* Crampsie Smith) is adequate. She suggests

adjourning the meeting rather than tabling the proposal, which was what Councilman Callahan was suggesting.

Now Gadfly is asking a lot here.

If you followed him and worked through this meeting, you spent a lot of time.

But when it comes to assessing our candidates for office, that is time well spent.

Gadfly started this post this morning thinking that Councilman Callahan might be running for mayor, and the pattern he sees in such interactions would have been more significant in that context.

But it applies to assessing him for another term as councilman too.