

The budget dance (1): the Fire Department and the Department of Community and Economic Development

The Bethlehem Gadfly Budget November 23, 2020

 *Latest in a series of posts on the City Budget* 

Mayor Robert Donchez 2021 Budget Address

View the Mayor's 2021 Proposed Budget

Let's think about the budget, all 300 pages and hundreds of line items of it.

City Council members are part-timers. Gadfly still runs in to people who don't realize that.

They are part-timers with important responsibilities.

The chief of which, arguably, is approving the City budget.

This is a tough budget year, a gut-punching one the Mayor called it.

The Mayor is proposing a total budget \$87.4m (it was \$80.2m last year) and a 5% tax increase, which translates into an increase to the average homeowner of \$46.

The most highly visible budget proposal so far is the Mayor's proposal to cut 4 firefighter and 2 service center positions.

The Mayor proposes, Council disposes.

Council will hold probably 4 budget hearings altogether, then approve the 2021 budget at the December 15 City Council meeting.

The interplay between Council and Administration that Gadfly witnessed last year was pretty benign, but this year it promises to be much more serious business because of pandemic-induced circumstances affecting revenue and a big jump in pension contributions required by law. (See **“budget”** under Topics on the sidebar for previous posts.)

Thus, there looks to be this year what Gadfly will call the “budget dance,” which is not only serious business but quite interesting to watch.

Specific budget proposals will not surface till the last budget hearing, but already interesting dancing has gone on, especially involving Councilman Callahan.

Councilman Callahan probed Fire Chief Achey and Business Administrator Evans for almost 8 minutes about specific financial details concerning the proposed personnel cuts in the Fire department. And then he made clear that he is not in favor of those cuts, which means he would look elsewhere in the budget to save some money.

Listen (6 mins.):

So, where elsewhere in the budget would Councilman Callahan look to make cuts? He has a specific proposal in mind regarding the Department of Community and Economic Development.

Councilman Callahan — specifically referencing a desire to save the cuts in the Fire Department — suggests a “no-brainer,” “win-win” plan to enable DCED to cut building inspectors, thus saving taxpayer money,

and improving efficiency of inspections by outsourcing inspections to companies the City would choose and the builders would pay for.

Listen (18 mins.), if too long for you, do the last 3-4 mins. as the Councilman wraps up, making his pitch:

smooth one and gives us the opportunity to see the tension inherent in hard choices.

Now the other Councilfolk will no doubt join the dance in upcoming meetings.

In fact, Councilman Callahan did get them to put on their dancing shoes at the last City Council meeting about funding for the pedestrian/bike bridge feasibility study.

And Gadfly will soon detail that interesting interplay for you as well.

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