

Lots for Council to think about

The Bethlehem Gadfly Budget, City government, Communication survey, Police December 3, 2020

 *Latest in a series of posts on City Government* 

Dear Council members:

I attempted to call in to the council meeting at least eight times Tuesday night, from both cell and landline with the same “mailbox full” message that I’ve never received before. (This format is more appropriate but I’m sorry to say it won’t be five minutes.)

I too am grateful for the real protection – and assistance – I have received from police in my lifetime. It has not been little. And I Appreciate so many citizens engaging Tuesday. And for your dedication.

There were many anecdotes and feelings expressed about proper police funding and, while anecdotes matter because we must value/validate our neighbors’ lives, in order to decide an issue that affects so many – so seriously, nothing less than science is sufficient, where it exists. And while science is not perfect, it has the ability to clarify. Lehigh’s Professor Ochs, (worthy of much better treatment than she has received) presented bits at the Community Engagement Initiative in the jarringly little time afforded her and by some Tuesday night citing the lack of causality between money and safety ...and more.

Sadly, the conversation about funding police appropriately, based on scientific research – not anecdote – doesn’t seem to have taken place here in our previously forward thinking city.

Can you prove the many people wrong who have spoken TO you and can you share the details of the thorough discussion you've had? And then continue to involve residents in it, rather than shut it down surreptitiously? Topics of such profound importance should not be rushed.

It is our obligation to those whose families and communities carry the concrete consequences of 400 years of horrific oppression that took place here but also whose deep veins still throb with its legacy today, keeping the progeny of many – and our entire community – buried in its inequity and far from our best. It is our obligation to repeat these facts until made right. Doing right and righting wrong is our responsibility.

The citizenry is owed some answers regarding the proper treatment of this invasive issue.

1)What are the notes and result of the CEI initiative? Where are they shared? What has council gleaned from the repeated calls on the topic? Is a city TRANSCRIPT of calls (in addition to the Gadfly's considerable effort) published for reference?

2)All people deserve to know the process of the budget consideration and of your decision making. Does council consider it radical, as suggested by some citizens, to ask that the police budget be evaluated and the process and results shared? Are police policies now and in perpetuity made public?

3)HOW did you decide to increase police funding? Was it as simple as, "We increase it every year per COL so do it again"? THIS is as important to many as the funding itself and arguably more important as it speaks to the transparency and health of our city government.

So, was the DISCUSSION completed and, if not, continue it, out of respect and obligation to ALL in the city.

Finally, 4) Broad outgoing communication like ease of access to city information for many does not seem to be a priority. Why not?

Variable electronic message boards (on highways) have been used since 1950 at the earliest. And text messaging technology has been mainstream for 15-20 years. Have you considered the efficacy of these and to what end? And if not, why not?

For instance, other than print newspaper and the city website, why do we not publicize data, decisions, upcoming meetings and agendas that affect everyone more widely to engage a larger portion of the electorate? Or, if we do, how?

It would be enlightening, for example, for residents to find the following on a digital message board (while crossing the Hill to Hill or the Minsi Trail, or on 4th St, Hayes St, Center St, Schoenersville, 8th Ave, or entering public buildings): “Next City Council Mtg Tues, Dec 15, 7PM. Listen on YouTube and call in starting at 7:05 with your concerns at 610...” or “The 2020 and proposed 2021 police budgets numbers are....., an increase of 3%”, or “City council’s reasoning for maintaining the police budget is explained at the City website under news”. You’ve sat through the call in sessions this year. You know the importance.

Or mass text messaging via a Remind.com type app? Or another? Imagine the reach and simplicity?

As I’ve mentioned this before without treatment, I’m imagining that it sounds ridiculous to some of you, and that’s upsetting. (I posed the question twice during call-ins and in the Gadfly blog.)

You must be aware that most institutions use such messaging boards and text messaging. (Our school buildings use them.)

Sure, I love navigating the city website to the narrow nested openings for budget or council meetings and then plumbing docs such as the budget for a few high impact numbers, but not everyone does. Hard to believe! I know.

Don't you want the public more engaged, especially the young that so many either hope for or complain about? Wouldn't you rather residents be more educated on city matters?

Thanks for your commitment. I look forward to your response(s)!

Truly,

Greg Zahm

PS

Also hard to believe, Allentown has had recycling containers in high pedestrian traffic areas of the city for years but Bethlehem STILL hasn't done this – even on Main Street. When I spoke with the (now deceased, bless him) recycling office director some years ago he explained that the historic oversight board said it was too expensive to obtain historically appropriate containers. (They were around \$900 each, I believe.) Yes, that's a lot. But what alternatives have been considered to remedy this missed opportunity?

The Bethlehem Gadfly