

# The ABCs are cloistered venues of power . . . Council must check and balance . . . We need to include more types of experience

The Bethlehem Gadfly City government June 26, 2020

 *Latest in a series of posts on City Government* 

## **Authorities, Boards, and Commissions**

Ok, so now you have your annual refresher on the ABCs and some current problems with them.

So Gadfly recommends that you listen to the whole 30 minutes of the discussion of the ABCs at the June 16 City Council meeting.

Yes, yes he does — all 30 minutes — he likes that you hear, that you experience your elected officials rather than just reading about them.

The audio below is an example of City Council at its best, on the same page, concerned about fostering proper and widespread citizen participation in city governance.

Councilwoman Van Wirt tees up the issue of how ABC members are selected, Councilwoman Negrón sets the issue on fire, President Waldron coolly engages the Mayor diplomatically and the Mayor reciprocates in kind, and the other Councilmembers ratify the need for Council attention and the process agreed on to move ahead.

Agreed on is that the Mayor will provide an inventory of openings now on ABCs and openings/reappointments coming up till the end of the year so that all concerned can have a head-start on cultivating a diverse pool of candidates.

There was not much focus on specific candidates up for approval on that June 16 night. The focus was on the process of selection, the diversity of the ABCs, and such matters. But Gadfly would say that a quiet example of the “problem” under consideration was the reappointment that night of a member of the Planning Commission who’s been in place 12 years. Gadfly has been to many of the Planning meetings, and if he were asked,

he would have had to say that from what he could see in the public deliberations (as opposed to whatever goes on in executive session) that the 12-year member was not a “presence” in deliberations.

Please kick back and listen.

**Audio Player not available in this archive**

### **Councilwoman Van Wirt (min. 0: 20)**

- [The process] seemed like a mere rubber stamp by Council to approve anyone the Mayor put forward.
- This has been the argument for Council continuing to approve reappointments . . . for people who have been on for years and years and decades.
- One of the first things I had asked for is resumes of people who were coming forward from the Mayor . . . so we could actually vet somebody.
- We still don't have attendance given for reappointments, but overall here's this ongoing kind of notion in Bethlehem that this is the Mayor's prerogative, but I'm pushing back against that because I feel that the reason that City Council was given the vote instead of just the Mayor appointing whomever he wanted so that we as representatives of the citizens of Bethlehem could insure that Authorities, Boards, and Commissions have people on them who actually represent the citizens, who look like the citizens, who come from different areas of the city, who come from different income levels, different perspectives, that's the point of City Council to me.
- [Last time] one of the suggestions that was made by President Waldron was that we invoke term limits . . . Any term limits discussion there's pros and cons to the approach, and the problem I had with that is our Authorities, Boards, and Commissions are all vastly different.
- Some have way more power and influence on day-to-day lives, some use our tax dollars, some leverage the borrowing capacity of the city, and these are ones that need particular scrutiny because that's where power is held.

- Power in this city is held in the Authorities, Boards, and Commissions. Not having a voice in that in Council, we allow the Administration to have one blanket approach to how things are done, and it doesn't represent this city.
- I would hate to institute term limits for a commission that we have trouble even filling all the spots on it. It doesn't seem to me that that would be a helpful thing.
- Maybe we should just apply it to our powerful commissions . . . the Bethlehem Parking Authority, the Zoning Hearing Board.
- I just wanted to have an open dialog with Council about these feelings.
- . . . haphazard approach to staffing . . .
- Often what we hear from the Administration is that they cannot find the people to staff them . . .
- We have no way of knowing who has submitted resumes unless they have also submitted them to Council.
- We don't know how the Mayor goes about finding people to go on these Authorities, Boards, and Commissions.
- I understand that it is his prerogative to put people forward, but it is also our prerogative and indeed our duty . . . to make sure that our ABCs look like Bethlehem.
- This is a huge responsibility of Council . . . The way things have been done in the past is not always the right way to do things right now.
- Circumstances change, cities change, and we are a reflection of the city, so I hope that we can consider a different way of approaching how we put people on these Authorities and Boards and Commissions.

### **Councilwoman Negrón (min. 5:38)**

- [Last year] I wrote an article in the *Morning Call* . . . where I was actually asking the people . . . to be actively engaged. to be civically engaged, to be part of the movement, being an elected official is one way, but [the ABCs] is another.
- [got responses from the Latino community mainly]

- Many of them said the Mayor is not going to appoint me . . . we look very different.
- I challenged them, I really did. Last Thursday I sent to all of you members of Council . . . sharing an email from a member of our community that back in February sent an email to the Mayor expressing interest in the Planning Commission, and here we go again.
- There's interest. I've been talking to individuals, and they want to be part of Commissions and Boards
- So with 76,000 people in the City, you can't tell me you can't find people to serve.
- Members of the Latino community say why would I bother if I'm not going to be appointed.
- It's our responsibility as members of Council to be the check and balances, we are not being the checks and balances.
- I am sick and tired of hearing this, professionally, and at all levels, because I have to hire another white person because there is no person of color that send me a resume of is qualifies for the job — really?!
- [My daughters] don't want to come back to Bethlehem . . . Why would you want to come back to a place that's not going to hire you, that looks down on you, that's going to treat you differently.
- This is the right time to think of our role as members of Council — checks and balances, that's what we are supposed to be doing.

### **President Waldron and the Mayor (min. 9:30)**

President Waldron engaged the Mayor in a conversation about the process of nominating ABCers. The Mayor is not for term limits. He does check the record of attendance and input for reappointees. If City Council votes down, he will submit another name. Has sometimes not reappointed people. It's a process, and he does evaluate. There are not many ABCs that have vacancies. Willing to sit down with Council members to review the appointments for the rest of the year.

- ARW: Do our Boards, Authorities, and Commissions represent the people of Bethlehem? What is the gender split? What is the

geographic split from different parts of the City? What is the racial split?

- ARW: At some point you can either take a passive role and say these are the people who have applied. or maybe there's some efforts with which the Administration can work with Council on to reach out to different groups that might be interested in serving but have not been tapped to say are you interested in serving/
- ARW: I think just that question to start the dialog might be helpful to have a little more diversity on those boards.
- RJD: I certainly would support that.
- ARW: This conversation should happen beforehand.

### **Councilwoman Van Wirt (min. 16:00)**

PVW brought up the problem “from the citizen’s perspective” of those ABCs who still meet during the day. An interested applicant to an ABC had to say no because he was a working person and could not make the time of the meeting.

- PVW: We have essentially cut out an entire part of the electorate that is willing to serve but can not meet at 4 o'clock because they have normal working jobs.
- Our ABCs are cloistered venues of power that are only accessible to a certain political class, and I certainly feel we need to consider how we change this dynamic so that all of our citizens can participate [by being on the boards or coming to the meetings and speaking their minds].

### **Councilwoman Negrón (min. 18)**

ON reiterates that she has people interested. Will have people interested send resumes to entire Council. She's hearing from non-Latinos too. Her community is not just the brown and black.

### **Councilman Colon (min. 20:20)**

Now a good time to start getting an inventory of Councilmanic appointments.

The Mayor agrees to do a full inventory of vacancies and reappointments coming up and to share that with Council.

### **Councilman Reynolds (min. 21:45)**

- We need to understand that because of traditional structures in our city, you have had certain groups of people and certain areas of the city that have been underrepresented.
- The sooner that we get that in the forefront of all of our minds . . . It's a conversation that we need to have about how we get as many people as possible involved in these conversations because people do bring different experiences.
- In general we need to do a better job in getting as many people involved in these conversations, especially when some of these conversations may affect communities traditionally underrepresented on these boards in the decision-making.
- We need to include more types of experience throughout the city and more histories throughout the city on these boards and commissions.
- It's on all of us to try to help find those people.

### **Councilwoman Crampsie Smith (min. 24:05)**

Frustration about process: more info, more notice. Hope the process can be streamlined so it works in a better fashion.

### **Councilman Callahan (min. 25:30)**

Not in favor of term limits. Influential, "power" boards need people with suitable background. Classes available for people who want to be on boards like planning. Can't just jump in to some boards. Need background. Would favor increasing membership on Human Relations Commission.

**The Bethlehem Gadfly**