

Gadfly muses about meetings

The Bethlehem Gadfly Police July 29, 2020

Latest in a series of posts about the Bethlehem Police

Gadfly has run his share of biggish meetings over the years. He muses while he waits to hear the promised announcement of what the Public Safety Committee has in store for us August 11.

Will you muse along? Gadfly has often asked you to role play Council or the Mayor. It's fun.

- We need a statement about the specific purpose/goal of the August 11 meeting. Not just an announcement of a meeting. What do we hope to achieve at the meeting? What will we have at the end of it?
- A series of meetings has been promised. What is the specific purpose/goal of the series? How does this meeting fit in to that plan? What will the next meeting take up? What is the time frame of the series? How are we marching toward an “end.”
- To save precious time for discussion, could the police department presentation be filmed and made available beforehand? The presentation at the Community Advisory Board may already have been filmed or recorded. (If not, why not?)
- To establish a foundation of facts, to provide the broadest base for discussion, and to eliminate time wasted just answering basic questions, could all relevant police reports be grouped for easy access before the meeting? In other words, help us prepare for meaningful discussion. In fact, expect the public to prepare.
- Gadfly feels a few documents should be custom-made and provided beforehand. For instance, 1) a document that links (or not) each of the “8 can't wait” points to specific language in the police directives; 2) a definition of “defunding the police,” a phrase /idea about which there is much confusion as the

Nextdoor blog commentary shows; 3) a definition of “systemic racism,” which, again, is a phrase/idea at which many people simply go blank. Needs examples too. We might be able to think of more such terms, others. In other words, establish a common meaning about some key terms around which discussion is likely to revolve.

- And then could we have an “Ask-the Mayor/Chief” process, as we did for the pandemic? The public submits questions, the City/Council assembles and winnows them, and answers them before the meeting. Again, clearing away as much as possible that can be cleared away in order to save precious time for valuable discussion. Don’t be afraid to ask the public to prepare for discussion. Help them cut away noise and focus on key concepts.
- Gadfly understands the need for the public to just talk — let off steam, feel recognized — and for elected officials to just listen, but, frankly, he is impatient with that, foresees a round and round like we see on the Neighborhood blog. This sounds like Gadfly talking against himself, but, for instance, if budget is the deadline, he feels the need to get “on with it.” More on this later.
- If this first meeting is just open talk and listening, all you need is an affable and intelligent emcee like Bob Novatnack was for the Nitschmann Martin Tower meeting. But Gadfly likes the idea of the Mayor and all Council members seen in a visibly active role.
- But in more focused meetings trying to move toward consensus, skilled management is needed. Like the Bethlehem-based group that did the police/community summits in Detroit. Gadfly fears floundering.
- Gadfly, as he said, wishes the first meeting was not just open talk. If not the first meeting, he wishes the next meeting was more directive, more focused. What are the questions we need to answer if there is to be something productive that comes

from all the sound and fury. Gadfly can think of some such questions on which he would focus and ask the public to focus. Do we have a beef with the police department? Has trust between the police department and the community broken down? If we were to think concretely about defunding the police, what would we cut? Are there other options for achieving/funding the laudable goals that the defunders want? Must the police department be defunded to achieve them? And so on and so on. We could give residents a place to answer these specific questions before a meeting, and ask them to focus their answers to such specific questions at a meeting. The Mayor and Council would need to get beyond generalized rhetoric to work in the trenches. Get resident ideas.

Lunch time, my good followers, would anyone like to take up the Muse?