


Visions of Bethlehem

The Bethlehem Gadfly Community Engagement Initiative September 15, 2020

 *Latest in a series of posts about the Community Engagement Initiative* 

Bear with your long-winded Gadfly as he sets the stage for his next post or two on the Community Engagement Initiative, willya?

In the run-up to the election in May 2019, Gadfly provided a prompt and asked 6 of the 7 candidates for Council seats (one was unable to participate) to do a mini-essay each week for 8 weeks preceding the election. To help us know them better. To help us get beyond the yard signs and the meet-and-greet patter and the Candidate Night stump speeches. 8 essays each. Due Saturday noon. Gadfly remembers that Grace good-naturedly (he thinks) beat him up over rumpling her festive Friday nights.

The candidates were wonderful. Imagine doing that in a busy campaign season on top of their day jobs. It said a lot about them. Gadfly was extremely grateful for the cooperation. And it was very instructive for voters. Gadfly followers were much appreciative. Gadfly hopes to do the same as his swan song before the next election, especially since the mayoral office is on the ballot.

In Gadfly's mind, the climactic prompt was the most important. At the end he asked the candidates to rise above the routine and mundane topics on which much election conversation and debate is based and talk about their "visions" of the City. Gadfly encouraged them to strive to be poets rather than politicians. It was probably the toughest prompt. It asked them to engage with us voters on a quite different level than their views on parking rates and such. And he doesn't believe they had "canned" answers.

Gadfly loved their varied answers, their varied visions, and he repeats them here, even those of the unsuccessful candidates, for Will Carpenter and David Saltzer are worthy to be remembered for what they contributed to a good race.

Visions appeal to our highest instincts.

Gadfly repeats their visions here as a frame for thinking in the next post or two of this series of the goal of a Community Engagement Initiative.

The job of a leader is to have a vision that inspires citizens, that connects with citizens, that engages citizens. Sometimes that vision is capsuled in a slogan. What is your vision of/for Bethlehem?

Will Carpenter

Bethlehem is a gem. We are very fortunate to have inherited what we have from past leaders. Many, many business leaders, residents, and city employees work to make what we have so special. Our first obligation is to respect that work and the needs of our current tax payers. Where is the sense in giving public funding to attract new businesses that harm existing ones? We must define what we value in our community and make policy to promote and protect those values.

This has always been a place where hard working people can afford to live, find good jobs and attend great schools. To protect this we need strong leadership to value and attract more than just high-end developments. Neighborhoods should have a seat at the table when new projects are considered. If a project is not supported by the surrounding neighborhood citizens, their concerns should be addressed before a project can move forward. At the very least, contested projects should not be awarded public funding or tax incentives.

Our historic city is uniquely situated for smart growth — or exploitation. Our geographic position, natural and historic beauty makes us attractive to businesses and investors. We should both protect and take advantage of this and make Bethlehem better for everyone — with projects that help fund solid infrastructure and connectivity, improve air and water quality, and so on to allow us all pursue our livelihoods on equal footing.

We must respect our past as we forge our future.

Michael Colon

Moving forward I want to keep making Bethlehem a place where natives want to stay and out-of-towners want to move to. As many industrial towns across this country lost their economic anchors, like a steel mill, they saw a mass exodus. Even as recently as my high school and college years, I'd have to hear from friends that Bethlehem did not appeal to them. Reasons included lack of career opportunities, a perception of a rusty old steel town, or simply "nothing to do." Through its reinvention and revitalization, Bethlehem has come out of the shadow of the Bethlehem Steel celebrating strong technology, arts, education, healthcare, and small business sectors. We are unique in how we've redefined what Bethlehem is and what it will continue to be. This energy revitalizes a community and brings it together. I envision more community hubs and events growing that bring out neighborhoods. The expanded Tunes at Twilight concert series, the upcoming 3rd season of the West Side Farmer's Market, the Recreation Bureau's Movies in the Park, all the events put on by the Downtown Bethlehem Association and SouthSide Arts District. I envision us to keep diversifying our economy, supporting the quality of life for all who live here, and fostering the sense of one big community. When we stop moving, the rust comes back.

David Saltzer

The Historic City of Bethlehem, The Christmas City, The Steel City, all of these make Bethlehem unique, and all of these describe this great city's ideals and history. This city is rich in its history, which needs to be preserved and continue to be taught to the next generation, as well as new residents and visitors. I have concerns that we are losing some of that history by allowing buildings to be built that do not fit into the neighborhoods or blend in with the beautiful architecture of the city. We need to look into rehabilitating some of these beautiful remaining structures and reusing them rather than destroying them and building new "box" structures. We are on the cusp of an exciting time and have the opportunity to do some phenomenal things to bring affordable housing into the city and attract businesses that will work with the city to maintain some of the history while providing good jobs with a livable wage. These initiatives will attract people to live, work, and reinvest in the city, allowing it to grow and create new history. Bethlehem-present

has the ability right now to make Bethlehem-future something that our previous generations would be proud of and happy to call home.

Walkability and bikeability are important issues. How can we make that more enjoyable and safer for everyone in the city? The city has applied for a grant to have a study done on this initiative. I am excited to see what the study shows and what the recommendations are.

J. William Reynolds

During my time on City Council, I have tried to lay out a vision for what our community needs to be moving forward. I included my vision for our city in my Bethlehem 2017 initiative when I proposed making our city more progressive and investing in several areas in which I felt we could do more. We needed to focus on the issues that will determine our success in the 21st century and do so by creating opportunities for our citizens to be involved in helping to create the solutions to the problems of the 21st century.

We need to focus on the issues that matter to our residents – climate, neighborhood reinvestment, technology, the efficiency of government. That focus starts with planning that includes creating long-term strategies for our community and our city. That planning isn't just elected officials sitting around talking. It involves government leveraging the best asset we have – the passion of our citizens.

Our community is at its best when we have everyone working in the same direction on an issue. Our NorthSide2027 neighborhood meetings are a great example of that.

Families, long-time residents, small business owners, community groups coming together to work on planning what the future of their neighborhood can be. This is the vision that I have always had for our city – our neighbors coming together to positively talk about what we are as a community and what we can be. We are going to need more of that to make sure Bethlehem never loses what makes our city what it is.

Grace Crampsie Smith

My vision is captured in the following: “Embrace our rich heritage as we build our future.” Given Bethlehem’s rich cultural and architectural history, it is fundamental to maintain a balance between preserving the city’s past, honoring the people and businesses that built this city, and promoting progress in our diverse community. Bethlehem is a city that has never been stagnant. We are unique in that for centuries Bethlehem has constantly evolved and re-invented itself in the arts, education, and business while never losing sight of its heritage. Maintaining a balance between our past and future will remain a constant challenge, yet an achievable one. The Steel Stacks is a fine example of connecting the past and the future. While many steelworkers had concerns re: this project, it has a good mix of preservation of the industry that built this city and the addition of a great cultural center for the city. As we move forward, it is imperative to honor and build upon our unique past, while incorporating modern and smart growth.

Paige Van Wirt

I think Bethlehem has been held in a paradigm of development that is left over from the early years when Bethlehem Steel closed: any development is good development. I think this is an outdated notion and does not reflect the reality that we are a unique city, poised for a development boom, with a diversified tax base and beautiful downtowns, architecture, and geography. We are in this strong position in part due to the hard work of our previous city leaders. However, this economic engine must now be harnessed and directed to create a city that respects our downtowns, demands excellence in the plans and vision of the investors in our city, and hews to the notion that a great city comes from incremental, healthy organic growth of codependent businesses, and does not run after the next large, bright shiny object.

I see a walkable Bethlehem, including a pedestrian bridge project if found to be feasible, that attracts young people to stay here, or to relocate to here, because of our wonderful quality of life. I see a Bethlehem that emphasizes alternative means of transportation, including walking on our future repaired sidewalks, with increased residential density downtown to support our small businesses. I see a Bethlehem that uses data to drive decisions, not campaign donations. I see a Bethlehem that respects the environment and uses the power of the

government to pilot green initiatives that have worked for other cities. I see a Bethlehem that prioritizes the development of affordable housing through targeted zoning changes which will spur construction in this price range. I see a Bethlehem, emboldened by the involvement of its citizens in local government, that is innovative, fiscally prudent, adaptive of best practices and determined to provide a joyous quality of life for all our citizens, a Bethlehem where the citizens know their voices matter, and will be heard.