

# A matter of decorum (9)

The Bethlehem Gadfly City government, Gadfly's posts, Serious Issues January 12, 2019  
*(9th in a series of posts on City Government)*

In post #2 in this series, Gadfly announced that the January 2 and all future City Council meetings will be available on video and at some point will be televised live.

Did you see Gadfly's tease there about the important issue on January 2 beginning min. 32:50? Did you peek?

That issue was Council decorum. Decorum: good taste, polite behavior. Gadfly raised the issue in his public comment at the beginning of the January 2 meeting, without realizing that President Waldron had evidently prepared to talk about it immediately after his annual report and that Council members were ready to weigh in later as well (CM Callahan twice, CW Van Wirt, CM Reynolds).

Gadfly's mantra is "Good conversation builds community." He believes in healthy, vigorous dialogue. He is especially sensitive to violations of common rules and practices for good conversation.

The last several weeks of 2018 were rough. The intersection of 2 W. Market and 306 S. New, covered in detail here on Gadfly, frayed Council and audience alike. There were to Gadfly's way of thinking several instances when decorum was nearly breached, and one in which Gadfly felt there was definite lack of civility. In his opening public comment January 2, without mentioning names, Gadfly suggested that President Waldron refresh all Council members on guidelines for decorum in Robert's Rules of Order.

President Waldron did not see violations of Robert's Rules, said there was healthy debate and mutual respect, did not see himself "gaveling down" Council members, valuing the First Amendment over Robert's Rules.

There followed in the last part of the January 2 meeting statements by CM Callahan, CW Van Wirt, CM Callahan again, concluding with CM

Reynolds. “Elder statesman” Reynolds, as he was delightfully termed by President Waldron, an 11yr veteran of Council, wrapped up the interchanges with a wonderful statement on the need for harmony and respect. Perfect punctuation.

End of story.

I thought.

I wasn’t going to write or speak any more about it, leaving the final apt word with CM Reynolds.

But something kept nagging me. The person whom Gadfly thought demonstrated lack of civility had reviewed the December 4 meeting minutes and saw no wrong and was blameless. That person would later apologize January 2 if anybody took offense without, it seemed, believing there was any offense to apologize for. President Waldron also said he reviewed minutes and didn’t “see a lot there as far as violation of Robert’s Rules.”

What was clearly visible to Gadfly was not visible to others, and, if indeed there was a violation of civility as he felt there was, it would not be avoided in the future without such recognition.

Here’s the specific line that jumped out at me. CM Callahan addressing CW Negrón in the 306 S. New portion of the December 4 meeting. The subject: their unfortunate “divide” over the Southside that you have seen Gadfly post about several times now.

CM Callahan: “I grew up here, I spent time on the Southside, way before you [addressing CW Negrón, though not mentioning her by name] moved here, ok, and you’re telling me right now that the Southside is worse now than it was 25-30 years ago, you don’t have a clue.”

The line was spoken with some vigor, with some passion. It’s the climactic “you don’t have a clue” that’s the mortal sin for Gadfly. CM Callahan totally invalidates the experience and knowledge of a fellow Council member who is a long-time resident of and acknowledged, respected leader of the Southside in a bluntly insulting way. The effect of

and impact of that line is not to engage debate and exchange ideas. And, Gadfly thinks, those words are contrary to the spirit and letter of Robert's Rules.

In Gadfly's respectful opinion, Councilman Callahan should not have spoken to Councilwoman Negrón in that manner. In Gadfly's respectful opinion, he committed a breach of decorum. Which neither he nor president Waldron has recognized.

But Gadfly might be all wrong, might be the only one who thinks this way. Perhaps a councilman addressing a councilwoman in that manner is acceptable behavior. As always, Gadfly suggests you go to the primary sources and make up your own minds.

1) The full statement by CM Callahan on December 4 that Gadfly felt was a breach of decorum (2 min. audio):

**AUDIO RECORDINGS UNAVAILABLE IN THIS ARCHIVE**

2) Gadfly's suggestion to President Waldron January 2 about refreshing Council on Robert's Rules (takes about a minute, beginning at min.

3:05): [https://youtu.be/EmnwV8\\_FFfQ](https://youtu.be/EmnwV8_FFfQ)

3) The first time he speaks about this issue at the January 2 meeting, CM Callahan "challenges" anybody to go into the minutes and find where he broke decorum; he would never do break decorum (min. 4:30 off out of 7 min. video): <https://youtu.be/Iu9ZmuBcrLU>

4) The second time he speaks on this issue at the January 2 meeting, CM Callahan indicates if anything was taken personally, he apologizes; if what he said hit someone personal, he apologizes; he didn't mean it; he's sorry if you didn't agree with what he said, but he didn't agree with what was said; has a right to voice his opinion; won't be stifled (3 min. video): [https://youtu.be/ev2OxMc\\_nmo](https://youtu.be/ev2OxMc_nmo)

Gadfly implies no intent to censor speech. In fact, followers will recognize that CM Callahan's "who pays the damn bills?" advocating the necessity of developers – also spoken in the heat of his defending improvements in the Southside – has spurred him to personally productive thinking about the relationship between economic and community development.

Gadfly simply points to what seems to him to have been a significant but overlooked instance in which civility lapsed, with hope that such obstacles to good conversation can be avoided.