

# Reflecting on the discussion at Allentown City Council July 29

The Bethlehem Gadfly George Floyd killing, Police August 4, 2020

 *Latest in a series of posts responding to the George Floyd killing* 

The reason for spending 4-5 posts on last Wednesday's Allentown City Council meeting was to see what we could glean from it to inform our thinking and our practice as we head toward the August 11 Bethlehem Public Safety Committee meeting that will discuss the Bethlehem police use of force policy and the Community Engagement Initiative.

Here are Gadfly's rambling reflections on that meeting.

As usual, your responses invited, especially if contrary to the Gadfly's.

The more perspectives the better.

1) We don't want to see the breakdown that yesterday's posts show within the Allentown City Council. Difference of opinion, yes, ok, but not a breakdown in civility or respect or cooperation. Please.

2) We have not had a recent police incident like the Allentown Sacred Heart incident to flare passions and to foster stand-taking. Gadfly wonders if our Bethlehem discussion of police policy and practice therefore will have only an "academic" feel to it. Where will deep motivation for change in Bethlehem — if, in fact, change is desired — come from? Can tragic cases elsewhere — nationally — do that? Can fear of tragic cases here do that? Or is there a history of troublesome incidents in Bethlehem of which the public is not generally aware?

3) Bethlehem proponents of specific changes in police policies and practices are liable to find, as Allentown did, that either what they want is already "on the books" or is controlled by state law or Human Resources/personnel policies or Union collective bargaining contracts.

Quick change in specific policies and practices — maybe even any change — in many cases is not possible. Gadfly felt that such reality severely deflated the Allentown reform position as parts of the resolution were taken up by the Allentown Council and dismissed. It almost felt sometimes that not enough homework was done.

4) We need someone to compare the “8 Can’t Wait” list with our police department regs. A match or not?

5) The Allentown Chief entertained the possibility of a citizen “advisory” group — interestingly, we may have just gotten one in the Community Advisory Board in which we participate with the NAACP. Its specific role still needs more explanation. Gadfly is not sure that reform voices from such groups as Black Lives Matter or Lehigh Valley Stands Up are on that Board, though. And, if not, how useful will that Board be? That Board has to hear challenging views.

6) For Big Picture discussion, “defunding the police” is an unfortunate phrase for the general public. Gadfly, of course, is not the first to say that.

7) For Big Picture discussion, “systemic racism” is an unfortunately vague term for the general public. Gadfly, of course, is not the first to say that either.

8) But it’s easy to see the result of that lack of understanding in the incredulity about both terms by many voices on the Next Door blog, using that blog as a snapshot of mainstream resident thinking.

9) Proponents of change in Bethlehem such as the ones who personally attended our July 7 Council meeting and who probably will be present August 11 assume an understanding of “defunding the police” and “systemic racism” that the voices on the Next Door blog, for instance, pretty much totally lack — and the proponents of change sometimes

unfortunately if understandably speak in terms of “demands.” Which feels rhetorically and strategically unwise to Gadfly.

10) Proponents of change in Bethlehem who want (need) general public support have a big hill to climb, much groundwork to lay, a significant good-faith educational task to perform. Again, representative mainstream resident voices on the Next Door blog either didn't understand what defunding the police means or immediately saw it as disastrous. They could not “picture” it.

11) It's up to the proponents of change in Bethlehem to patiently help mainstream residents “picture” it.

12) 2/3's or more of the Allentown population are People of Color. They don't need the terms explained. Systemic racism is their felt reality. They were pounding on the outside walls of Council chambers while inside the Allentown Council deflated the resolution as if they and that practice didn't exist. We don't have the pressure from those numbers here. In Bethlehem, less than 10% of the population is Black (for historical reasons as Councilman Reynolds has interestingly explained) and the roughly 30% Latino population (as suggested by Councilwoman Negrón last Council meeting) are quiet (silenced?) perhaps because they fear reprisal. The 60% white population has no felt reality to associate with the terms and thus needs to be educated.

13) When it came to the major, overarching issue of defunding or divesting the police, Gadfly feels the Allentown proponents of change got completely steamrolled. They did not even try to respond (maybe they were consciously being quiet??? Gadfly is no strategist). They did not have an answer for basic objections to defunding/divestment and for commonsense questions about defunding/divestment. Gadfly himself could not have voted to further examine the possibility of defunding the police on the basis of anything they said. No case was made.

14) Who will write the answer to the Allentown Chief who says his budget has been cut, but he is still operating underbudget, in a fiscally responsible way; who says his force is down 20% or whatever from a few years ago, yet they are out there 24/7 during a pandemic risking their lives for us; who says that to cut the force even more at this moment would negate recent hard-gotten gains in minority recruiting; who says that domestic violence calls are among the most dangerous of all and no place for a social worker; and who says that it would make no sense to sacrifice training to the budget knife. Who does the math and tells the Chief what we're going to cut from his budget and then where we're putting that money — and, most importantly, how public safety will be thereby improved? Nobody has yet shown that defunding is, indeed, reasonably possible. Needs to happen.

15) Gadfly knows many of you follow Bernie O'Hare's Lehigh Valley Ramblings blog, and Bernie had an **“Allentown's Real Heroes”** post there yesterday morning that's on point here. Nobody yet that Gadfly sees is writing the response to the kind of tack Bernie takes there. And that is what's needed if the defunding reform gains any traction.

16) Gadfly perked up at this statement by the Allentown Chief. He said, if we are going to make changes, let's do it right, let's take time, let's partner with somebody to do research, let's find a model plan right for Allentown. Plans specifically at Eugene, Oregon, and St. Petersburg, Florida, were mentioned, but perhaps as inapplicable to Allentown. But if one is trying to gain support for defunding, for shaping new visions of public safety, why are some concrete examples of explorations and experiments elsewhere not brought forward to help break the death grip of the status quo. People on and off the Head Table need a “picture” . . . need a vision. Leadership creates visions. (The pending research report on local policing by Lehigh's Prof Holona Ochs promises to be relevant here.)

17) Gadfly still doesn't have a good answer to such questions he has been posing lately like do “we” have a beef with the department? Has trust

between police and community broken down in Bethlehem or in some parts of Bethlehem? Is reform urgently needed here? It seems like the Minneapolis police department of the Floyd case has a history of trouble and controversy. That department needs to be fixed. Allentown may have that kind of history too. Are we in that position? Or are we thinking that this cultural moment of national conversation presents us with a valuable opportunity to rethink how we do the public safety business and explore other options?

Gentlemen, gentle ladies, start your engines.

Find anything here on which to chew?