

2021 budget proposes cutting firefighters

The Bethlehem Gadfly Uncategorized November 10, 2020

 *Latest in a series of posts on the City Budget* 

Mayor Robert Donchez 2021 Budget Address

View the Mayor's 2021 Proposed Budget

First meeting on the 2021 budget, November 9

The first hearing on the City's proposed 2021 budget was held in front of City Council last night. It was 4 1/2 hours.

No doubt going too long for the press to have a handy overview story for us this morning.

On deck for discussion were the Fire Department, the Department of Community and Economic Development, and the Police Department.

Budget meetings can be yawners.

Surprising to Gadfly, 30-some YouTube viewers stayed for the full ride. (However, as of this morning there were 200+ views.)

It's the Year of the Pandemic; remember. revenues are down.

The Fates were not kind to Mayor Donchez as his two terms wind to a close.

And there is also a matter of increased pension obligations, which, frankly, Gadfly is not clear on and needs some schooling about.

But the reality is “Bethlehem’s pension payments will increase by over one million dollars next year.”

Cuts in such a situation of lessened revenue and increased costs are necessary.

The Mayor is proposing a total budget \$87.4m (it was \$80.2m last year) and a 5% tax increase, which translates into an increase to the average homeowner of \$46.

Personnel costs are always the big ticket item in a budget.

Who in last night’s deliberations is the Mayor proposing to cut?

4 firefighters and 2 **Service Center** positions.

The Fire Department would move from 110 to 106 firefighters, and the Service Center would run on 13 not 15 employees in the Mayor’s plan.

Firefighter Union head Bryan Bokan called in to strongly refute the Fire Chief’s presentation that the cuts would not impair service or safety (**see video, beginning min. 3:50**). Bokan presented some different facts about staffing, said that morale in the department is “terrible,” said that the Union was denied a sit-down to discuss cost savings without cutting personnel, and said he was told that the cuts will not be restored when the economy turns around.

So here’s one issue for us to think about. Recognizing that budget cuts will have to be made this year, should firefighters be cut? Several Council

members probed that, as well they should, for this is a matter of public safety. Councilman Callahan, for instance, said no.

But another, related issue arose.

The Police Department — remember that Police Departments in this post-GeorgeFloyd era are being scrutinized around the country — escaped with its 154 member workforce intact, and its proposed budget remains around 20% of the total city budget.

These were facts not lost on a series of callers at the end of the meeting who favored re-imagining public safety (one used the dreaded because it is misunderstood “d” word: defunding) in ways that have been aired here on the blog.

In effect, the callers were pointing out how protected the police department is. Same-old, same-old.

Gadfly followers can imagine that the portion of the meeting on the police department was the one that most interested him, and he will spend considerable time on it once he gets through his focus on the Walter Wallace incident that is now up to 8 posts.

For now, though, you should be thinking about whether the fire department should eat personnel cuts and the police department not.

There are three more budget hearings, and the final budget will be voted on at City Council December 15.

*Selections from Sarah Cassi, “Head of Bethlehem firefighters’ union: Proposed cuts ‘atrocious act’ that must not be tolerated.”
leheighvalleylive.com. November 9, 2020.*

The Bethlehem firefighters’ union is used to fighting flames and smoke, but its president is now fighting proposed staff cuts during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Bethlehem Mayor Bob Donchez last week unveiled his proposed 2021 budget, which includes a 5% tax increase and cutting six city jobs through attrition: four firefighters and two Bethlehem Service Center employees.

On Monday, Bryan Bokan, president of Local 735 Bethlehem Firefighters, posted an open plea on Facebook to Bethlehem residents.

Bokan expressed frustration after meetings with Donchez and Chief Warren Achey, saying the union members offered to make any other cuts so as not to lose personnel.

“We told them right out we understood there would be cuts coming,” Bokan said Monday afternoon. “There’s so much in the budget that we could work with ... we asked them to give us a number and we will do everything we can to get to that number.”

But Bokan said they were never given a targeted figure, and they were never given the chance to compromise or even discuss alternative measures with the city.

“Every firefighter serving the city knows what an impact this pandemic has had on the city, including its families, friends, patients, citizens we serve, and every firefighter is willing to sacrifice and compromise to keep the city as safe as possible,” Bokan posted.

The fire department would have 106 firefighters if the current cuts are approved. Bokan said he asked city officials if the positions would be refilled when the economy rebounds, but was told staffing would stay 106 firefighters.

“This atrocious act must not and will not be tolerated,” he wrote in the open plea on Facebook.

“We truly need your support in standing up to the Mayor and Fire Chief who have grown further from the realism that Bethlehem needs its first responders and that the Lehigh Valley is one of the only areas in Pennsylvania still growing. They want to make the city less safe, they would like to make the men and women who protect the structures in which they live, less safe,” Bokan wrote.

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