

Gadfly mayoral forum #7: The State of the City

[The Bethlehem Gadfly](#) [Candidates for election](#), [Election](#), [Forum](#), [Gadfly Forum](#) April 27, 2021

🦋 *Latest in a series of posts on the Gadfly Forum* 🦋

The Mayoral candidate comparison chart

The prompt:

The Mayor delivered the annual **State of the City** address April 16.

For this Forum response, Gadfly asked the candidates to think of the state of the city, the Mayor's state of the city address, the content of that address, criticism of or additions to the address, the way in which that address is given, focusing more resident attention on it, and options or supplements to it.

Big open range again for the candidates to roam in.

Listen to Gadfly's full prompt [here](#).

Dana Grubb

The Mayor's delivery of a "state of the city" speech, currently done at a Chamber of Commerce sponsored business meeting, presents some opportunities for improvement. Attendees must pay in order to be at the meeting and hear the speech, which limits who may attend. I have reservations about that. My sense has been that, when it comes to this address, the general public doesn't receive the same focus as a paying audience. That is problematic.



My preference would be for the Mayor to deliver their address via local media, perhaps on our local PBS 39 station, so that anyone who is interested can tune in. Additionally, the speech could be live streamed on

the city's website and archived so that even more people could hear what the Mayor has to say.

As for this year's address by Mayor Donchez, it struck an even tone concerning the challenges of the past year by acknowledging a number of them. The Mayor credited partners and recognized opportunities. He listed accomplishments, which sends a positive vibe, much like cheerleaders who encourage the team on the field.

During the pandemic, the City's Health Bureau — who reported to me when I was the Deputy Director of Community Development — excelled and deserved the special mention they received this year. Support from other city departments which helped deliver the vaccine was also recognized, as it should have been.

But some aspects of the speech seemed stale, and of questionable value: old points were regurgitated, and past accomplishments were praised again.

Make no mistake about it: challenges remain in our city. Gentrification, out of scale development, a preponderance of “upscale” rental housing over owner-occupied housing, lack of affordable housing, poor city facility maintenance especially in parks, the question of ingrained racism and equal treatment under the law, and opportunities for our diverse population are all issues that were ignored by Mayor Donchez in his “state of the city” speech. They should not have been, if presenting a complete picture of the “state of the city” was the aim of the speech. While it is nice to hear about the character and charm of the city, its many amenities and achievements, it is necessary to also hear about the tests being faced by the city, its residents, and its government. These demands must be faced unflinchingly if Bethlehem is going to move forward and become better: ignoring challenges does not make them go away.

It might be better to hear from residents as well as government about the “state of the city” if we really want a thorough account. Residents' perspectives would likely be more realistic and not as one-sided or sugar-coated, providing a sharper focus for the direction in which the city needs to move.

J. William Reynolds

Ed, The “State of the City” hits at one of the basic functions of government – how do we communicate and engage with our residents? It isn’t a one-off event

but rather a 365-day-a-year effort to interact with the people of our city. When I launched the Connecting Bethlehem initiative two years ago, the idea was to measure citizen satisfaction AND engagement with our current communication channels. While many people are satisfied with the current communication measures that the city uses (and our revamped website and service app are substantial improvements), there were two takeaways in particular that are important for this conversation.



- Residents want a centralized place to get information pertaining to Bethlehem
- A not insignificant percentage of residents do not have internet access, so their ability to engage and interact with the City is limited.

As Mayor, I would look to revamp the ways in which the City shares information. Think about it as a 365-day “State of the City.” During my campaign, I have been using some of these tools to communicate and interact with residents about what I have focused on during my time on City Council and our ideas for building coalitions in Bethlehem to create change and implement new initiatives.

- Study and implement a plan to achieve 100 percent high-speed internet access in the city. We need to use COVID Relief Funds (which is specifically allowable in the legislation) to conduct a study to understand the depth of the issue as well as potential long-term solutions. These efforts should include a coalition of the Bethlehem

Area School District, community members, and non-profit organizations

- Hold virtual town halls to interact with people who are unable to come into City Hall or come to City Council meetings
- Make “The Bethlehem Corner” a weekly opportunity to talk about city issues, have city employees talk about leaf collection, snow removal, etc., and have on community members to talk about important topics in Bethlehem
- Have these conversations in the community whenever possible. It is vitally important to meet people where they live, work, and play. City Hall should be the last place where we have these conversations

This last point gets to the crux of your post. There is nothing wrong with speaking about the state of the city to a group of business and community leaders. That, however, can only be one strategy for talking about where as a city and where we are going. Our Climate Action Plan, Northside 2027, and Community Engagement Initiative have also been designed to increase the ability of residents and community service providers to be involved in creating change as it relates to their view of the “state of the city.” It can’t be a one-way conversation from City Hall to the community. Everyone’s perspective on our community is important and City Hall must utilize every tool that it has to gather and present more comprehensive pictures on the current and future state of our city.

Residents are welcome to fashion reflections on candidate comments, sending them to ejg1@lehigh.edu. On Gadfly we seek the good conversation that builds community, so please be courteous at all times. Gadfly retains the right to abridge and to edit your reflections and to decline posts that are repetitive or that contain personal attacks. Gadfly will publish resident reflections on the week’s Forum at noon on Friday.

The Bethlehem Gadfly