

A modest proposal: “press conferences” for the Mayor and City Council

The Bethlehem Gadfly Modest proposals, Serious Issues August 13, 2019

(8th in a series of modest proposals)

“There seems to be no mechanism to receive answers to questions.”

So transparency, accountability, visibility, and their synonyms roll easily off the various political platforms — especially at election time.

But we’re missing something here.

It’s something I noticed right away about City meetings before I was even Gadfly.

Interaction . . . Feedback . . . Response > true communication.

I remember pre-Gadfly likening public commentary at City Council meetings to something out of a Kafka story — petitioners speaking to a silent wall of inscrutable judges.

Happily I now feel I know our Mayor and Council members much better, so the impersonality I felt then in those early days is a good deal mitigated.

But there is still no interaction . . . feedback . . . response > true communication.

Like, for instance, to Gadfly #1's question at the last Council meeting. Or to yours truly Gadfly00's questions about Polk Street.

Not that the Mayor and Council members couldn't respond at meetings. There is no "law" against such. The Harrisburg Open Records folk tell me there could be response — but most public agencies simply *choose* not to respond to public commentary at meetings.

So "we" can ask questions or make statements that invite, need, or demand response, but "they" remain quiet.

Gadfly gets it. He's had administrative experience. He knows what its like on the other side of the Head Table.

City Council meetings are basically business meetings. Doing the business is the primary purpose of the meetings.

So we need something else.

What is that something Gadfly asks himself.

More and more Gadfly thinks we need something like a periodic press conference with the Mayor and Council or perhaps separately.

Now some of you younger followers might glaze over, ignorant of what a press conference is — since the words have been disappeared from the Trumpster White House dictionary.

Can you imagine Nicole, Sara, Doug, and the others asking the Mayor and/or Council members freewheeling questions on topics of current interest in a give-and-take format?

Probably not — the newspapers are declining in various ways and not interested in or capable of that kind of coverage anymore.

If the Mayor and/or Council would volunteer to appear at a “press conference” (we’d need to find another name), say once a month, could we find a neutral, objective, respected, experienced, journalistic figure (a Bill-White-type figure or Bill himself) to act as facilitator/interlocutor in a format that would enable expansion on topics of interest and concern?

Out there right now at this very moment, perhaps even reading this, are people who are planning to run for Mayor. Can we ask them to think about putting some muscle and foundation under the campaign rhetoric transparency promise.

Firm proposals to achieve transparency.

In any event, Gadfly’s latest modest proposal is that we institute “press conferences” for the Mayor and Council.