

# In next week's election, residents should choose neighborhood integrity over developers' profits

The Bethlehem Gadfly Candidates for election May 14, 2021

 *Latest in a series of posts on candidates for election* 

*Jim Fiorentino is an Attorney and former Chair of the City of Bethlehem Planning Commission.*

In my 10 years on the Bethlehem Planning Commission (2006-2016), I witnessed Willie Reynolds as a Council person and Bob Donchez as a Council person and then Mayor rubber-stamp anything a developer wanted from the City. The fact that they took money and/or jobs for family members from developers once would have mattered to progressives who usually decry the cozy relationship between money and politicians. I wish I knew what happened to those people whom I supported for Council and who now support a person for Mayor who has no qualms over the selling of Bethlehem to the highest bidders.

I voted and supported Willie Reynolds for both Council and then the Mayor's office in the 2013 primary when he ran against Bob Donchez. However, in 2015 when the Donchez administration decided to engage in back-room ordinance drafting with lawyers working for developers and Willie Reynolds as Council President rushed approval of the ordinance in a lame duck session, I realized that the choice in 2013 had been about differences of age rather than integrity, as both men were willing to do the bidding of their financial contributors.

I was the Chair of the Planning Commission in 2015 when, during the reading of the proposed Martin Tower re-zoning ordinance, I became concerned about the way in which the ordinance was worded. There were many provisions in the proposed ordinance that were so unique in their details that it seemed as if it had been written with a specific purpose in mind. This was a problem as it gave the appearance that the ordinance was drafted to benefit a particular set of interests rather than for the purpose of using an even-handed approach to regulate all properties that fall within a general category of land use. Only thanks to a right to know request by a local blogger did we learn that my concerns were justified—the documents obtained by the blogger revealed that the

developers' attorneys and the lawyers in the City Solicitor's Office were drafting the ordinance together and in secret.

2015 was a year in which the atmosphere regarding zoning changes was already heightened with suspicion. The Donchez Administration's willingness to draft an ordinance regulating the Market Street area produced public outcry because it seemed designed only to benefit a stockbroker whose attorneys were major contributors to the Mayor's campaign. As a result, two new council members, Olga Negron and Michael Colón, were slated to take office in January 2016, promising to deliver an ethics ordinance that would disrupt the practices between wealthy donors and public officials which were degrading citizens' trust in local government.

It became clear that the two new candidates running for Council were not as likely to vote for the Martin Tower ordinance as those who had been defeated in the 2015 election. I advocated for the tabling of the Martin Tower ordinance so that the new City Council could weigh in on it. I believed that bringing this ordinance before the new Council was something that the citizens expected and deserved. Instead, Council President Reynolds rushed the ordinance through, while aggressively belittling anyone who even raised the question of political favoritism at play due to the campaign contributors made to him and others on Council by the Martin Tower developers. At the time, Reynolds proclaimed that a speedy vote on the ordinance was necessary so that the developers could demolish Martin Tower. Reynolds promised to fix the problems with the ordinance after the fact.

With six years behind us, Reynolds' proclamations still look like nothing more than a made up excuse to benefit developers who gave him large campaign contributions. We all know how long it actually took for those developers to demolish the Martin Tower and we all know that even that amount of time was, apparently, insufficient time for Willie Reynolds to follow through on his promise of fixing the ordinance.

So it's not surprising that just this month those developers are back for another bite of the apple as they are well aware that they will be able to get whatever they want from this administration and Councilman Reynolds. Indeed the current issue regarding the developer's request for

even more ordinance changes to allow them to evade the normal processes for project approval was tabled last week on a motion by an ally of Councilman Reynolds. How convenient that the delay allows him to avoid making another embarrassing vote that favors his campaign donors just before next week's primary. Indeed, in the Mayoral debate on Thursday night Reynolds said he is opposed to the change. One is left to wonder why this change of heart couldn't have been communicated to the public in his official capacity at Tuesday's City Council meeting.

Reynolds has developed a skill for performative politics. There are plans and task forces and commissions for every problem, but never a solution in the form of an ordinance to benefit the people of Bethlehem. People say he has changed. People say he no longer takes money from developers. People say he is now in favor of the ethics ordinance that would limit campaign contributions. Some people are buying this. I cannot. I prefer results and actions of conscience. He is in the middle of a term on City Council. I believe that the citizens of Bethlehem deserve to see action not promises before they turn over the most important job in the city to him. He should await seeking higher office until he's learned to elevate the interests of the people of Bethlehem over those of the developers.

Jim Fiorentino