

“I need a few more minutes if you don’t mind, please.”

The Bethlehem Gadfly City government January 18, 2020

 *Latest in a series of posts on city government* 

RULES OF COUNCIL 3.B

Public Comment is extended as set forth in Rule 3 hereinabove but in no event shall one individual address Council during Public Comment for a period of time in excess of five (5) minutes.

“I need a few more minutes if you don’t mind, please.”

Bethlehem resident, City Council meeting

January 6, 2020

This should be a secret.

Councilman Callahan has told some secrets at Council. Like parking meters really are set to give you an extra three minutes beyond your limit (the executive director of the Parking Authority lost all his hair at that disclosure). Like the hairless executive director of the Parking Authority found another job in another city (most likely coincidence between these two examples not causation).

This should be a secret: President Waldron usually conducts public comment with a soft gavel.

If this becomes common knowledge, Council meetings will likely be besieged by legions of wind demons (wonderful phrase from American novelist Stephen Crane).

So buffeted, the Ship of State will not advance on the Sea of Progress.

And the Water Department contracts will never get approved.

For example, at the January 6 Council meeting a resident got to her five minutes and seamlessly inserted “*I need a few more minutes if you don’t mind, please*” into her narrative and without a word or a gesture of approval from President Waldron (not that Gadfly could hear or see; check the video yourself) flowed on for another almost four minutes.

Pretty cheeky, thought the shy and timid Gadfly.

And, on second thought, why didn’t I think of that.

For President Waldron is pretty liberal with public comment time.

But this situation is very unusual.

From Gadfly’s perspective in the cheap seats, the public is pretty cognizant of the five-minute border and generally respects it, and when someone crosses over (Gadfly has been guilty) there seems to be a bit of time built in to President Waldron’s meter (just like the parking meters) before there is a gentle but firm nudge to finish.

Gadfly cannot remember one instance in the past two years of his Council-watching when someone was shut down mid-breath, never once was the podium trap-door used (a salute to Gadfly #1 for that one).

So anyone can speak during public comment at Council meetings and speak for five minutes plus a little.

The rule is five minutes, and five minutes maddeningly measured, as colorfully described by our irrepressible Gadfly #1, by the stupid light in the idiot box on the Head Table.

That idiot box is a vivid acknowledgment that though we have free speech, it is limited. And we chafe at that. Gadfly #1, who, it is rumored, did the superb cave paintings at Lascaux, reminds us that at one time public comment time was unlimited, then it was twelve minutes, before now being five.

Our free speech has been gradually rationed. (Even the energy in the Sun is running down.)

And we chafe.

But that is the rule. And it is not President Waldron's rule. And he is reasonably flexible about applying it.

In fact, in a deliciously humorous irony, the same resident who banked on the magic word "please" in the quote above to get extra time for herself during public comment later [volunteered her appreciation](#) at that presidential largesse (good SAT word) as she criticized other manifestations of the soft gavel in other Council situations.

So Gadfly doesn't think the five-minute rule unreasonable since we do not live in an ideal world, and he tries to work within it, well, right up to the limit, and he appreciates the soft gavel when he is wrestling to the end of his thoughts.

In this context, he wouldn't have President Waldron any other way.

Thank you, Mr. Soft Gavel.

Are you with me or agin' me so far? Responses invited.

But — remembering Gadfly #1's division of this free speech subject into several parts — the road ahead is more rocky.

to be continued . . .