

Ex-Chief DiLuzio: “I figured, the hell with it — I’ll just retire now”

The Bethlehem Gadfly Police September 5, 2020

 Latest in a series of posts about the Bethlehem Police 

from Sarah M. Wojcik and Jennifer Sheehan, “Pennsylvania police chief steps down after reposting offensive Facebook meme.” Morning Call, September 4, 2020.

Bethlehem police Chief Mark DiLuzio abruptly retired Friday, five days after reposting an offensive Facebook [meme](#) that prompted a public scolding by the mayor.

“I do agree that it compromised my position. I figured, the hell with it — I’ll just retire now,” DiLuzio said, noting he had planned to retire at the end of the year. “I served honorably, and the people that truly know me know that I have no regrets about my career and no regrets about my retirement.” DiLuzio reposted a meme that mocked NBA players protesting police violence against African Americans. He then deleted it and apologized, saying he didn’t realize the offensive nature of its message.

In a prepared statement Friday, Mayor Robert Donchez — who elevated DiLuzio from lieutenant to chief in 2014 — called credibility in leadership paramount in government, adding, “these are times when those qualities are critical to managing the numerous challenges we are facing.” Donchez noted that the city, including DiLuzio, has been engaged with citizen groups to deal with complex issues of systemic racism, police conduct and social justice that cities across the country are addressing. “This has happened at a time when the citizens of Bethlehem justly expect the effectiveness of their chief of police to be beyond reproach,” the statement said. When news of DiLuzio’s social media post made headlines this week, Donchez was unequivocal in his rebuke. He vowed that should DiLuzio break his promise to avoid a repeat incident, it would be met with a consequence “of the most severe nature.”

Bethlehem Councilman J. William Reynolds called the day a “painful” one for the city, since he believes DiLuzio “cares deeply about the city.”

But Reynolds believes the departure is necessary to help the city move forward with conversations about racial inequity and police reform that “many in the community desperately want to have.” Never before has police chief been such an important and justly scrutinized role, he said.

Councilwoman Paige Van Wirt was more critical, saying she felt DiLuzio has shown a lack of understanding ever since the discussions about police reform and institutional racism began in the city in earnest this summer. “He took on the bad apple philosophy, that this was all about bad cops. I never heard him say the word ‘racism’ or even acknowledge that there was a structural problem,” Van Wirt said.

Councilwoman Olga Negron said she doesn’t think DiLuzio meant anything malicious by sharing the post on social media, but said his apology, which focused on text that accompanied the photo and not the image itself, showed a disconnect with what people found offensive. She hopes the moment serves as a lesson for other city employees, officials and police officers. “We have to do better,” she said.

Activist organizations in the Valley, such as Lehigh Valley Stands Up and Black Lives Matter Lehigh Valley, also took to social media to react to the news of DiLuzio’s retirement. The groups say his announcement demonstrates a new level accountability for leaders and police when it comes to “racism and bigotry.”

When there’s a cloud over you, there’s a risk, said Esther Lee, president of the Bethlehem’s NAACP. “In times like these as we assess our police departments and their activities, we always have to be very careful about who is handling the information,” Lee said. “You want to make sure there is no doubt and that we have no doubt as a people about the information we get from the police.”

When asked about DiLuzio’s sharing of the meme, Lee said she doesn’t believe DiLuzio is racist. “I don’t put that on him and not on the department,” Lee said.

In looking back at his near four decades in law enforcement, DiLuzio, 60, said he has no regrets about his choice in career and his time in Bethlehem. “I was interested in law enforcement because I wanted to be involved in my community,” DiLuzio said. “I wanted to help people out

when they were in the worst conditions of their life.” “The focus was always to get closure for [the victim’s] family,” DiLuzio said. “It didn’t matter if the victim was white, black, green or orange. It didn’t matter if they were a normal guy or a criminal. This was someone who was killed and that person and his family needed to see someone brought to justice. That’s the way I worked my cases and that’s the way I trained my detectives.”

But the last few months have been exhausting and frustrating for those in law enforcement, he said. Advocates for police reform have encouraged people to get rid of prejudiced views against people of color, which DiLuzio said he agrees with, but the criticism has painted all police officers negatively. “I’ve always told new officers that you work for the citizens of Bethlehem. Don’t ever forget that,” DiLuzio said. “But now when you put that uniform on you’re immediately labeled a racist, a thug or someone who will use police brutality at any point.” He said it was his highest privilege to work with people committed to bettering the community, and has developed long-lasting connections with residents he was sworn to protect. But he worries if the current climate will result in fewer people seeking careers in law enforcement. Police, he believes, are “fighting an uphill battle” with fires being stoked by the extreme left and right. With fewer recruits, his greatest fear is that departments will lower standards and make matters worse. “I still believe this is an honorable profession,” DiLuzio said. “I still think those who do the job are the finest people around.”