

Water and Sewer and Public Works budgets discussed at first budget hearing

The Bethlehem Gadfly Budget, Serious Issues November 14, 2019

 7th in a series of posts on the 2020 Budget 

2020 Proposed Budget

1st-Budget-Hrg-11-12-19-Agenda-2

Gadfly went to the important meeting of the Zoning Hearing Board Tuesday night and thus did not go to the first budget hearing.

But he knew the budget hearing would be available on video to catch up on.

Thanks again to President Waldron and Council for moving on this video system last year. It is very helpful.

Now, though the camera doesn't really take in the audience, Gadfly senses there weren't many resident attendees at the hearing. Maybe none.

Last year Mr Haines and I were the lone spectators.

That's a shame.

Here is the time to ask your questions about how money is spent and to make your pitch about how the money should be spent.

The topics Tuesday night were Water/Sewer and Public Works. The former might not be a real “hot” topic, but Public Works is a big department, now even including what was the separate Recreation department. Potentially lots of residents issues there — streets, sidewalks, traffic, etc.

It’s up to the Council members to represent our “needs” but always best for us to speak up.

The meeting was very cordial, same as last year.

There were no points of contention.

Most interesting, Gadfly thought, was Councilman Callahan sort of forecasting that there were some major budget considerations coming up in the area of Public Works, perhaps in the next administration. (The Mayor, he said, has 1.5 years left.)

Here are links to the meeting video and some highlights:

Budget Hearing #1, November 12

[Part 1](#)

[Part 2](#)

[Part 3](#)

Water and Sewer: Edward Boscola

- General praise for the quality of our water — wins awards — and the performance of our operation.
- Part 1 min. 41:30-Part 2 min. 3:20: Interesting conversation with Councilman Callahan. What’s the quality of the piping, are we replacing on a regular basis? Costs \$1m/mile to replace a water main, and we have 500 miles. We can’t grow ourselves out of our debt. Where are we going to get the money? Can’t do

rate rise every year. Council's going to have to take a good hard look at this in upcoming years.

- Gadfly learns: we “sell” water to a bunch of outside places, Bethlehem Township, Hanover Township, etc. Outside City customer rates regulated by the PUC (Pennsylvania Utilities Commission). We can set rates inside city, but we choose to go by what the PUC sets outside. In sewer, however, our only customers are inside the city, and we set a bulk rate for the Townships, who then charge their residents whatever they want. We're seeking a 5-10% rate rise from the PUC; it costs \$250,000-\$400,000 for accounting and legal fees to argue a case before the PUC.

Public Works: Mike Alkhal

- Discussion of the new storm water plan — the “biggest new item” — highlighted in the Mayor's budget address as a major new program: Part 3 mins 15:30-20:17.
- Memorial Pool is on schedule for opening next year.
- Streets: Part 3 mins. 32:20-38:48. Significant number of streets that need to be re-surfaced, and we're trying to make progress. Upgrading ADA ramps is a major portion of the cost. Re-doing streets has good impact on property owners. Always doing what we can. We have 200 linear miles of roads and another 40-60 of alleys. Roads are rated every two years. About \$18m worth of work needed on bad roads, and we're only putting in, say, \$2m/yr. Councilman Callahan raises the point that we're going to have to do something — a road tax?
- Discussion of how roads are chewed up by UGI and others doing repairs: Part 3 mins. 38:48-43:32. Councilman Callahan asking about the possible need to revise an ordinance or to have a new one, and again talking about need to raise money for roads.