

Was there not one point in the City analysis worthy of discussion by the BPA?

The Bethlehem Gadfly Parking, Serious Issues September 9, 2019

(117th in a series of posts on parking)

Gadfly's been a little backed up. There are at least three rather significant issues on which he wants to spend more time (expertly avoiding ending with a preposition): the August 28 Bethlehem Parking Authority meeting, the August 20 City Council meeting, and the last Planning Commission meeting — the one that approved the new building at 548 N. New.

But sometimes it's wise to let issues marinate. First impressions, which sometimes can be faulty, fade. Emotions cool. And other voices, other opinions have time to be heard.

So six days have passed since Gadfly's last post on the meeting in which the Bethlehem Parking Authority chose the developer to construct a building along the 3rd St frontage of the new Polk Street Garage. You can find all the previous posts by going to ["Parking"](#) on the Gadfly sidebar.

Let's go back to that meeting, to that decision.

Gadfly likes to think that he is Everyperson. Except that he has more time to go to a lot of the City meetings. (You would if you had more time, right?) He's an average citizen. He has no special or inside knowledge. He sees himself as "you" sitting there, an interested resident, trying to understand how things work in your town.

The BPA Board had proposals from two developers — Nova and Peron.

To help the Board make a decision, the BPA requested the City to evaluate the two proposals. An adhoc City Committee received in-person presentations from both developers and wrote a report basically favoring Nova.

To prepare for the decision, BPA Board members were sent three items: 1) the two developer proposals, 2) a “technical review” of the two proposals (not an evaluation) from BPA consultant Desman, and 3) the City evaluation.

Gadfly does not have the print proposals from the developer. But at the August 28 meeting, he heard the Desman “technical review” — a non-evaluative “factual compilation of the proposals” — and the next day he secured a copy of the City’s evaluation.

Thus, in making observations on the BPA Board’s decision, Gadfly has access to 2 of the 3 sources the Board had. And so do you. You can hear the Desman “technical review” on Gadfly’s meeting audio linked below, and the link to the City evaluation is here: [BPA Proposal Analysis \(FINAL\)_1](#) We will always try to provide access to the primary sources so that you can form your own opinions.

AUDIO UNAVAILABLE IN THIS ARCHIVE

Gadfly is puzzled by the Board chair’s immediate response to the “technical review” at the meeting: “Basically two 5-story buildings, retail on first floor, apartments above.” That response — without any appreciation of subtlety, without any appreciation of nuance in the City evaluation — flattens the two proposals into undifferentiated clones, thereby justifying the higher purchase price as the determinative factor. If the proposals are the same, yes, certainly, by all means, take the higher offer by Peron. Makes perfect sense.

But in Gadfly’s judgment, based on the City report, the proposals are not the same. The proposals, in fact, are significantly different. Here, according to the City evaluation, is what we lose by favoring Peron:

- possibly 45 apartments instead of 32 (whether Nova proposed 5 floors of residential as indicated in the City report or 4 was, strangely, not resolved)
- “a mixture of market rate residential apartment sizes, presenting a potentially more resilient residential product”
- “a rooftop restaurant concept, providing greater use of the building by the public and potentially driving more transient parkers to the Polk Street Parking Garage”
- a design “emulating elements found on the former Bethlehem Steel site”
- a design that “not only encourages the pedestrian interest in the Third Street corridor, but also draws interest down Polk Street”
- a design adding “a variety of building styles to the corridor and . . . inclusive of more desirable design elements”
- “overall aesthetics, including the stone arches reflecting the ruins and the steel elements, [that] provide an overall stronger relationship to the place in which the building is located”
- “proposed use of the building [that] is more comprehensive, providing commercial opportunities beyond first floor retail and greater opportunity for use by the general public”

To Gadfly this positive mix in Nova of the practical, financial, historical, aesthetic, and architectural — this mix of novelty and beauty — this appeal to City goals of a walkable city and the link to our heritage — was *surely worthy of discussion*.

But the BPA sped to approval of Peron in one minute, fifty seconds.

There was not one second of discussion on the requested evaluation by the City. Which seemed quite odd to Gadfly, as well as discourteous. It said to the City, your opinion was totally worthless. The City report was not even mentioned by the Board members. Not one element of it will appear in the minutes. The historian of the future will have no idea that there was a competing design for the Polker.

Was there not one point in the City analysis worthy of discussion?

But as the motion-maker said, “I looked at both of those projects closely, and they’re similar, but there are differences, but I can’t get past the difference in price.”

“Money, money, money, money — Money makes the world go around” as the well known song from *Cabaret* goes.

Out here in the cheap seats, it certainly seems that the BPA Board saw its chief purpose in this decision getting the greatest amount of money for itself. At the end of the day, “It’s dollars and cents,” said a third Board member. And, “taking a BPA perspective” in his forceful post opposing the City Committee, [John Price](#) likewise points to “the significant income to the BPA” from the CRIZ part of the Peron proposal.

Gadfly gets it. It would have taken great courage for one of the Board members to say even, “Whoa, hold on a minute. We owe it to common decency to hear from the City Committee we asked to take a look at this. And we owe it to the public to make sure we have thoroughly considered all perspectives in making our decision.” But that’s what idealistic Gadfly would have expected at the very least.

It would have taken even greater courage for one of the Board members to say, “Let’s put the money aside for a few minutes, we can always come back to it, but our purpose here is not simply to make money for the Parking Authority, and the question we should be front-loading is how do these proposals align with City goals — which proposal is best for the City at large.”

Gadfly was looking for someone on the BPA Board to say, “At the end of the day we have the opportunity to advance City pedestrian goals, to have a building that speaks of our Bethlehem history, the opportunity to do something special, exciting, unique. Let’s see if we can take advantage of this opportunity and still be fiscally responsible to the Parking Authority.”

Gadfly is impossible, isn’t he?