

Council election: Waldron, president; Colon, vice president!

The Bethlehem Gadfly City government January 7, 2020

 *Latest in a series of posts on city government* 

Elections are always exciting, and this one even more so because of the large turnout of residents to champion their candidate — the kind of public participation Gadfly lives for!

And the winners were Adam Waldron, returning as Council president, and Michael Colon as vice president.

Before the election Grace Crampsie Smith was sworn in for the first time as an elected Council member (she was appointed several months ago to fill Shawn Martell's seat), as well as elected returnees Colon, Reynolds, and Van Wirt.

Gadfly will process and post some video of and commentary on the dramatic doings in the near future, but for now he recommends Sara Satullo's article below to give you a sense of the significant issues and feelings at play in the election.

It's a new year, new beginning for our City Council under the leadership
of

Waldron and Colon!





Sara K. Satullo, “Given chance to select 1st Latina leader, Bethlehem City Council opts for status quo.” lehighvalleylive.com, January 7, 2020.

Despite a crowd of passionate supporters, Bethlehem City Council passed on a chance to appoint its first Latina council president, opting to continue under the leadership of President Adam Waldron.

Monday night's council reorganization meeting — typically a routine affair — drew resident after resident urging the seven-member body to elect outgoing Council Vice President Olga Negron as council's president for the next two years.

After two years as council president, Waldron — a father of four and local business owner — admitted he was unsure if he wanted another term, but ultimately decided he hoped to continue the council precedent of a president serving two terms after conversations with his colleagues and some trusted advisors.

Negron's supporters flooded the podium to speak of her dedication to her community, her long resume of volunteerism and service on boards and her dedication to hearing from all of her constituents. Some spoke about how much it would mean for them to see a Latino, and a woman at that, leading their city's government chambers. Dolores Caskey became council's first female president in 1980.

Resident Mary Toulouse urged council to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the 19th Amendment, which gave women the right to vote, by selecting Negron to lead the elected council. "She is super qualified and I'm sure she would do an outstanding job," Toulouse said.

Southside resident Kimberly Carrell Smith said Negron represents a new kind of leadership in Bethlehem that's sorely needed. "She has such a quiet way of bringing people together, listening and doing her research," Carrell Smith said.

It was an unusual show of support for an internal council leadership post. The council president's primary duty is running the bi-monthly council meetings and coordinating with the city clerk's office and members of council. The president receives \$500 more a year than other council members. The vice president assumes the role when the president is absent.

Those in attendance Monday night ascribed the role with greater meaning.

“I think the time has come for leadership of women on city council and, I’ll even say, a female mayor of Bethlehem,” Councilwoman Dr. Paige Van Wirt said to applause.

Some expressed concerns that Waldron is not well-enough versed in Robert’s Rules of Order and has too “light of a gavel.” Council meetings in recent months have drawn on for hours, often featuring clashes amongst council members and controversy.

Resident Barbara Diamond said a change in leadership could be good for council as the lack of decorum lately has been concerning. “The council’s reputation is at stake,” she said.

Negron grew up attending rotary club meetings alongside her father, intrigued by Robert’s rules and she’s been drawn to leadership roles her entire life.

“Leadership is something that is part of my nature,” she said. “It is something I am very comfortable doing. .. You don’t have to say much in order to make a point. I think actions are much more powerful.”

While weighing a second run at the presidency, Waldron said he spoke to all council members and he did not receive significant negative feedback about how he runs meetings. He touted his efforts to get all council meetings live-streamed and posted to YouTube to make city hall more accessible to the public.

“I have been criticized a bit for allowing people to speak too much. That’s a criticism I will take,” Waldron said. “I do have what is called a soft gavel. In my opportunity to limit speech, I have chosen repeatedly not to do that.”

Southside resident Seth Moglen thanked Waldron for his time as president, but urged council to select Negron — someone with institutional knowledge, an impressive resume and who is beloved to an extraordinary degree. “I ask you to take seriously what you’ve heard from your neighbors,” Moglen said.

Ultimately, Councilwoman Grace Crampsie Smith nominated Waldron for a second term and Van Wirt nominated Negron. Waldron won in a 4-3 vote with Negron, Councilman Bryan Callahan and Van Wirt backing Negron for the leadership role.

Councilman J. William Reynolds said both Waldron and Negron are great council people. While in the moment these discussions can seem so important, council titles pale in importance to the working relationships between council, the mayor and the public, he said. “The future of this city comes down to our ability to work together and establish relationships,” Reynolds said.

Negron declined another shot at vice president and nominated Van Wirt for the position while Callahan nominated Councilman Michael Colon for the role. The job was not on Colon’s radar, but he said he would be happy to serve.

While vice president may be a symbolic position, Van Wirt said she thinks there’s some real power in that symbolism when it’s been 40 years since there’s been a female council president and that’s not “for want of qualified candidates.” Council missed a real opportunity Monday night to select a president whose election would have meant a lot to people across the community — women, Southside residents and Puerto Ricans, Van Wirt said.

Nicole Radzievich, “Here’s who will lead Bethlehem City Council.” Morning Call, January 7, 2020.

Bethlehem City Councilman Adam Waldron, a small businessman who acknowledges he has a “soft gavel,” was narrowly re-elected by his colleagues Monday to serve another two years as council president over Councilwoman Olga Negrón, a long-time community organizer whose supporters rallied around her at the meeting.

Twenty-two people urged City Council to choose Negrón because of her decades of experience in building consensus. Some noted the symbolism of having a qualified Latina woman in the position on the 100th anniversary of the ratification of the 19th Amendment, which gave women the right to vote.

But a majority of council decided to stay the course with Waldron, who has led council through thorny zoning and other policy issues over the last two years. Council has also faced criticism that there have been recent breakdowns in political decorum at meetings.

Waldron acknowledged that he has been faulted for allowing people speak too much and using a “soft gavel,” but he stands by his decisions not to limit speech. “I don’t think limiting ideas that you’re not in agreement with or are unpopular is a healthy dialogue,” he said. “I think you combat unpopular ideas with better ideas.” He said he has also championed more open government with his role in getting council meetings live-streamed.

Voting for Waldron were council members Michael Colon, Grace Crampsie Smith, J. William Reynolds and Waldron. Council members Negrón, Paige Van Wirt and Bryan Callahan voted for Negrón.

As council vice president and a member of various community board, Negrón has the experience to manage decorum at council meetings, Diamond said. Negrón has served on nonprofit boards and been appointed by two governors to serve on statewide task forces.

Diamond's words of support for Negron were echoed for more than an hour by supporters ranging from Lehigh political scientist Al Wurth to Hotel Bethlehem managing partner Bruce Haines.

Negron thanked her supporters. "I've been told I'm the quiet one you don't have to say much to make a point," she said. "I think actions are much more powerful."

Also Monday, Councilman Michael Colon was elected vice president over Councilwoman Paige Van Wirt. The vice president runs council meetings when the president is absent.