

Council candidates differ over the role of tax revenue in considering Martin Tower proposal

The Bethlehem Gadfly Candidates for election, Election, Martin Tower May 14, 2021

 *Latest in a series of posts on Martin Tower* 

ref: **Martin Tower proposal significantly interrogated at Council**

ref: **Trying to nail down the Martin Tower developer**

ref: **Martin Tower developer responds to Council request**

ref: **Martin Tower developer reminds Council that “tax revenues are an equally important consideration**

ref: **Martin Tower developer: “I can’t believe this is as much of an issue as it is”**

The recent official discussions about the Martin Tower project are in themselves of interest to many Gadfly followers, but probably at this moment the election 4 days away trumps that interest.

We can combine both interests here, though, by focusing on the three incumbent candidates’ participation in the discussion of the Martin Tower project at the May 4 City Council meeting.

Well, however, candidate Reynolds did not participate in this aspect of discussion at the meeting. Which is very unusual. When has Councilman Reynolds not spoken on an issue? Gadfly doesn’t know the reason why now mayoral candidate Reynolds remained silent, but it is hard not to speculate about its connection to an issue in the campaign. An issue in the campaign has been the possible effect Martin Tower developer Ronca’s large contribution may have had on the Reynolds vote at that controversial time of the major discussion on a vision for the site as well as necessary zoning changes six years ago.

Followers will find here classic Callahan: a pro-development tax-hawk.

Candidate Crampsie Smith questions the developer closely, differs dramatically with Callahan on the primacy of tax revenue in the Council decision, and it is her motion that triggers a month’s hiatus for further discussion before a vote.

So we can certainly learn something about the candidates here.

A brief recap: About to begin construction at the site, the Martin Tower developer asks for a zoning change in regard to parking, on the surface a minor issue. At a previous meeting, however, Council took a wider view of the project and, in Gadfly's phrase, "seriously interrogated" it. President Waldron suggested that the developer and the City meet before the May 4 Council meeting and discuss and agree on some issues. No such meeting occurred, but the developer sent a long, itemized letter to Council addressing most or all of the issues Council raised and adding the positive impact the project will have on our tax revenue. At the May 4 Council meeting discussion of issues was not resolved and decision was postponed a month.

Councilwoman Van Wirt began the discussion May 4 in tiger mode: "I anticipated this letter with a lot of interest. I was hoping the City would hear the urgency in our tone at the last meeting about sitting down with the developer and kind of hammering out something solid that we could react to, but, unfortunately, that did not occur. I read this letter extremely carefully. . . . I find it incredulous to believe. . . . pushes the edges of my own credibility. . . . also strains my credibility. . . . pushes my credibility. . . . I was looking for something of substance in this letter. My overall impression of this letter was seriously disappointed."

Don't hide your feelings, Councilwoman!

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In direct contrast, a calm Councilman Callahan defended the developer, taking a good bit of time carefully discussing points in the developer's long, itemized letter one-by-one, hoping to take most or all of the issues "off the table."

Here are those long Callahan audio clips if you are interested in hearing his defenses.

Perhaps of more significance is the argument Councilman Callahan wraps around his defense, which I summarize for you here, but which

you can hear for yourself in the several clips below: The issue is “huge” for Callahan, and the hang-up, perplexingly, is over just 2 lanes of parking. It’s a “small ask,” and there’s a chance that the end users will walk away from the project if they do not get the designs they want. For it is end-user designs that are in the plan not the developer’s, and they have a contract right to opt out if they do not get the design they want. The developers are trying to help the City, a City that is not too receptive to development (unlike Easton, with whom we are competing) — we are simply making development harder and harder. This developer is willing to talk about affordable housing, and this project (like the proposals on the Southside coming to Council) gives us the opportunity to see and show how serious we are about something we call a crisis. It is because we are being negative and pushing back on developers that we have the crisis. Councilman Callahan wants to put \$5m of the \$33m Rescue money coming in to affordable housing, and he wants Council to join him on that — again putting money where our mouths are. “This vote that we take is going to have an impact on a lot of different entities. . . . we’re looking at a substantial amount of taxpayer money in tax increases if this doesn’t go through. The City needs to bring in an extra \$2m a year to balance our budgets. And there’s no question that this is probably the largest development project in the City of Bethlehem.”

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Contrary to Councilman Callahan’s approach, Councilwoman Crampsie Smith engages the developer in a way that evokes his frustration over the way Council is slow-walking what, in his view, should be an easy decision on a minor issue. It is in this interchange that the developer says, in exasperation, “I can’t believe this is as much of an issue as it is.”

For a rousing finish to this post today, you must hear Councilwoman Crampsie Smith push back vigorously against her colleague’s lectures on and foregrounding of tax revenue in the Council decision: “I think I can speak for all of us. . . . Nobody ever wants to raise taxes. . . . I grew up as a freebie-lunch student. I have been on my own, you know, for the last few years supporting my three kids. I know what it’s like to really struggle financially. That’s probably why I am such an advocate for those who are oppressed. . . . It doesn’t matter where any of us are at as far as our income goes. . . . Certainly we need to look at development to

increase our tax base. But the way I see here, black and white, simply is we're not going to approve of a development project simply because it's going to bring taxes in. . . . We have to vote on changing the law. . . . We have to vote our conscience and as representatives of the people of this city. . . . So the bottom line is, we're here to vote on changing of the law not to vote on changing the law just because we want to increase our tax base in the city."

We give candidate Crampsie Smith the last word: "we're here to vote on changing of the law not to vote on changing the law just because we want to increase our tax base in the city."

So, again, we have a razor-sharp difference in approach by the Council candidates who are running against each other.

And we might even be able to learn something from the mayoral candidate's silence.