

The Bethlehem Parking Authority Proposal: “Keep Open Minds about Alternative Ideas” (4)

The Bethlehem Gadfly Parking, Serious Issues September 20, 2018

(4th in a series of posts on parking)

Paige Van Wirt is a Bethlehem City Councilwoman, physician, and small business owner.

Public meeting Thursday, September 20, 2018, Town Hall, 6PM to discuss a proposal by our representatives from the Bethlehem Parking Authority to raise parking meter fees and meter violation fines in the Northside and Southside business districts.

Gadfly, I hope that we will have an informative and vigorous public discussion tonight about the impact of parking meter rate increases in Bethlehem and alternatives to the current proposal. One of these alternatives may accomplish the same goals but get there in a more efficient way, while creating a parking system that really works. I write this here to give some light and hope that we can keep open minds about alternative ideas. Here are three such ideas.

1) Variable rate pricing:

Parking is a commodity, similar to any resource that is priced based on its scarcity or its surplus. Parking systems across the country have adopted this variable rate system, where % occupancy is the target, not flat rates per hour. This means where there is a surplus of street-metered parking, the city lowers rates to get the desired occupancy, and where there is scarcity, the city raises the price. The target is generally 85% occupancy. This system creates efficiencies, where parkers who are price-insensitive park in the more expensive scarce spots and those who are

price-sensitive utilize garages. The rate is less expensive in early morning hours, when there is less demand, and more expensive in the afternoons, when demand is at its peak.

It would appear this variable rate pricing is an administrative burden, but Bethlehem was prescient in its purchasing of new meters that have the capacity for variable rate parking embedded in them. They talk to each other and command central and transit data on occupancy back to the central office, where prices can be set to reflect occupancy. The city eliminates parking time limits, allowing the rate of the meter to float during the day depending on historical occupancy data, such as we have right in front of us in the Desman survey. This system has been very successful in multiple cities across the country.

2) Raising fines:

While variable rate systems may not generate across the board revenue as anticipated in the flat rate increase to \$1.50, it can be offset by increasing the fines from \$10 to \$20. We should explore the financials in this proposal. I believe it's doable. But, more importantly, we are creating a parking system that helps, rather than harms, our small businesses and our two very different downtowns. The current proposed flat rate increase will harm merchants in the southside who continue to have less vigorous street parking demand. Rates should be low enough there to attract, not deter, parkers.

3) Some free parking:

Finally, while the city offers merchants the ability to purchase discounted parking vouchers for customers, I think the city should offer first 2 hours free parking across the board in city garages in the CBDs to attract customers to both our downtowns, for hourly users. Again, I believe the losses incurred by the BPA would be offset by 2 more economically healthy downtowns.

More to the point, what is the purpose of the BPA? Certainly, it is not exclusively to build parking garages and raise meter rates to finance bond obligations. It is to provide an efficient parking system to help our citizens and our small businesses thrive. That is the litmus test we should apply — how do we make our two very different downtowns thrive?

Paige