

Your refresher course in the ABCs (2)

The Bethlehem Gadfly City government June 25, 2020

 *Latest in a series of posts on City Government* 

Authorities, Boards, and Commissions

Gadfly has devoted considerable attention to the ABCs. At the bottom of the right-hand sidebar here, you will find a Search box. Enter “ABCs” and click to find the full collection of those posts.

In his apprentice year, Gadfly went to as many ABC meetings as possible, often the only spectator person in attendance. From his personal observation, Gadfly became very knowledgeable about the quality of the members on many of the ABC groups, quality which, in the overwhelming majority of the cases, was excellent.

Over and over again, Gadfly was impressed by the care with which this corps of volunteers did their work.

There were some dead spaces, though, and some questionable choices.

There are, however, three issues of concern with the ABCs:

1) The appointment and re-appointment of members: it is the prerogative of the Mayor to appoint members, and apparently historically Council almost always acted as a “rubber stamp” on the Mayor’s nominations. As if these appointments were an uncontested “perk” of office rather than a “check and balance.” Council seems to be given little more than a vita shortly before a meeting in which approval is sought. Gadfly can understand the “politics” of that tradition (elections have consequences) but has expressed the view that, at the very least, reappointments should be based on evidence of performance, more than just on a vita. Lately, though, even the appropriateness of first appointments has been scrutinized. In any event, the issue is that Council is not exercising proper oversight over the appointments. Councilwoman Van Wirt has rightly been especially concerned about this.

2) Meeting times: The ABCs do public business, and they meet in public, mostly at Town Hall. Each ABC sets its own meeting time at the mutually decided upon time agreed on by the members. By law the meetings times must be scheduled and advertised a year ahead. The idea is that the citizenry knows when the meetings are and can attend if so desired. Most of the meetings are in the evening, thus “after dinner,” “after work” (for most people). But some (1/3?) were held during the day, late afternoon, when (most) people are working and thus would find it difficult to attend. Some important meetings requiring broad public input before significant decisions have been held at these difficult-to-attend times. Causing some justifiable consternation. Councilwoman Van Wirt again took the lead on this point — the Mayor did ask the afternoon ABCs to consider moving their times to evening. Some but not all did.

3) “representation”: Do these ABCs have a balance of genders, a balance of our city’s ethnic and racial make-up, a balance of members from both sides of the river? It is not clear that such thinking has gone into staffing the ABCs, and there are obvious and notable gaps on the ABC menu of membership.

It is easy to think of these ABC procedural matters as mere housekeeping to be as quickly disposed of at City Council meetings as legal decorum allows.

But not so.

We have voting power over the Mayor and the Councilors, but there’s a layer of important personnel here we don’t directly control and of which we might not even be aware. (Think presidential appointment of Federal judges.)

Now you should have the backstory for the good 1/2hr. discussion of the ABCs at the June 16 Council meeting.

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