

A fire in the fire department

The Bethlehem Gadfly City government December 23, 2020

 *Latest in a series of posts on City Government* 

At the December 15 City Council meeting during the discussion of ordinance 8A — Adopting the 2021 General Fund Budget — Councilwoman Crampsie Smith alluded to an email about internal dissension in the Fire Department.

Here's what she said (2 mins.):

“I proposed my amendment with my concern about eliminating four firefighter positions . . . and that did not pass . . . but I would ask . . . the administration to take note that we all received an email from . . . a concerned citizen . . . that was forwarded to Robert Brooks who is First Vice President of the Firefighters Local . . . I don't know the facts, but some of the information is a little alarming . . . It sounds like what concerns me because, again, because our Public Safety, whether policemen, firemen, EMTs or whatever . . . they are the backbone of our community and assuring that our community is safe . . . and from this memo it sounds like there is a lot of dissension . . . regarding the Fire Chief at this point . . . and I would request that the Administration would sit down and try to broker with those two entities . . . to see if we can try to resolve these issues . . . as Mr. Brooks notes that the morale in the Fire department is at an all time low . . . and we all know that if the morale is low in any department . . . that certainly can affect the quality of work . . . and we're talking about people who deal with life and death safety issues . . . I would be more than willing to help mediate . . . I do that every day . . . I do feel that this issue be addressed . . . We are looking at a department in our city that is responsible for the safety of our citizens . . .

and if there is morale and tension in the department it needs to be addressed.”

At the time the Councilwoman’s comments were a mystery, to be sure. Gadfly had no idea what she was talking about. And the subject dropped, no one else responded.

The issue seemed to be a mixture of budget and personnel, and Gadfly knows from his short experience that personnel matters are not usually discussed in open meetings.

Lacking better information, Gadfly said nothing to you when doing his review of the meeting, but he sought a copy of the email through the Right-to-Know process.

See the linked documents:

Fire Department email

What you’ll find is an email from “Concerned Citizen” to Union official Brooks dated 3:25 December 15, the day of the City Council meeting, with an attached document titled “Fact Checking the Fire Chief.”

Brooks then forwarded “Concerned Citizen’s” email to the members of City Council at 3:49, in time to be read before the 7PM meeting if the Councilors were checking their email in timely fashion.

In his transmittal message, Brooks lamented the way Council members deferred to the Chief’s acquiescence to the cuts of the 4 firefighters at the November 9 budget hearing, said that department morale is “at an all time low,” and asked Council to “reconsider” its position on cutting the 4 firefighters till it understood the firefighter position on the impact of those cuts.

“Concerned Citizen’s” attachment is 4 pages of correcting false or misleading statements the Chief made at the November 9 budget meeting, concluding that the Chief “deliberately misinformed” Council to justify the personnel cuts.

Whew!

So now Councilwoman Crampsie Smith’s comments are demystified only to have the issue mystified again:

- Why did “Concerned Citizen” wait from November 9 to December 15 to make this damning report, when it was virtually too late for a change?
- Why did Councilwoman Crampsie Smith not seize on the allegation of false information from the Chief to renew her attempt to save the firefighter positions?
- Why was there no response to this allegation of deliberate misinformation from Councilman Callahan, who previously also tried to save the positions, especially since he specifically asked about Fire Department morale on November 9 in what turned out to be a very awkward interchange with the Chief? Check it, see what you think ([video](#) at min. 1:09:50).
- Why did no other Council members respond to the allegations?
- Was it because there is an understanding among Council members that there would be no budget changes at this late date (the budget has to be approved by the end of the year, and December 15 was the last meeting)?
- For what it’s worth — and it might not be much — Gadfly remembers thinking on November 9 that the Chief’s presentation and responses seemed lackadaisical, like one who has been put in a tough position, defending something — the 4 cuts — he really didn’t believe in (see the Chief in meeting

video at min. 3:35 and min. 13:15 and especially min. 26:09).
That would make the Chief a victim of the budget process
rather than a participator.

What do you think will happen next on this front?

A change in Fire Department leadership?

Anything?

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