

Gadfly council forum #3: city services

The Bethlehem Gadfly Candidates for election, Election, Forum, Gadfly Forum March 30, 2021

 Latest in a series of posts on the Gadfly Forum 

The Council candidates comparison chart

“As Councilperson, warmly inviting and empowering residents to participate will be at the core of my service.”
Kiera Wilhelm

“Elected officials need to find better ways to go to the communities that tend to have less of a voice in local politics.”
Rachel Leon

“If I am elected, I will view constituent services as, in fact, part of ‘my job’.”
Hillary Kwiatek

“In serving and responding to others within the community my golden rule will continue to be: ‘It doesn’t cost you anything to be nice to people’.”
Grace Crampsie Smith

“[City residents] know I will look into their particular situation and, if I have to, fight and act on their concerns!”
Bryan Callahan

The prompt:

Bryan, Grace, Hillary, Rachel, Kiera

Our first two Forums were on “heady” topics: the budget and development.

I’d like to come more down to earth in this Forum #3.

Council responsibilities include setting the budget, approving personnel appointments, and passing laws. Big ticket items. On the other hand, the mayor has responsibilities for the day-to-day running of the city — from trash to parking to paving to snow to leaves, etc., and etc.

But you will get asked (or told!) about these things. Even Gadfly gets asked about this kind of basic quality of life/city services stuff. People think since I have a big mouth, I have some power to take care of a problem or get something done at City Hall. So you surely will get asked. People look at you as their voice in City Hall, the person to bring complaints to. The City Council meeting is what I call the “face” of city government. You’ve seen people show up at Town Hall or call in about water leaking into their cellar from a neighbor, fireworks bothering their dogs, and such things. It’s where they bring their complaints. And you’ve seen the Council prez awkwardly try to plead “not my job” and pass the resident on.

(Veterans Bryan and Grace might talk about their experience with this kind of resident contact. What have people complained to you about, what did you do, what was the outcome?)

So in this Forum I want you to think about basic city services. Residents will be telling you things, a lot good, we hope, but certainly some complaints about basic city services. It’s in the nature of your job to have your ear to the ground. Since you are now asking people for their vote, some no doubt are responding to you with a sort of “what will you do for me”? Or here’s what I want you to do. That is, here’s a problem we’d like you to do something about. Will you work on it if I vote for you?

If elected, you may not have a hand in the day-to-day managing of public services, but you will probably find it important to establish good rapport with the Mayor and department heads and so forth to be a channel for resident voices. If another level of persuasion is necessary, you have the power of the bully pulpit at Council meetings to call attention to a problem that you feel needs tending. And in the final analysis you might utilize the power of the budget to shape how City services are performed or delivered.

What are you hearing with your ear to the ground about those basic city services that have such a great impact on the day-to-day lives of the average resident?

Please share what you are hearing, what you are thinking about on this level.

What would you like to see worked on, improved?

You will be working with a new mayor — will there be things you will be bringing to his attention as he shapes his agenda and priorities at this basic level of City/resident relationship and interaction?

Thanks for your service and willingness to serve.

Kiera Wilhelm

When I first moved back to Bethlehem seven years ago, I lived in an apartment at a fairly busy intersection downtown. It was a noisy spot, located above a bar, and with a good amount of incessant atmospheric noise at large. One day, I was speaking (okay, *complaining*) to a friend about it, who had lived in Bethlehem for years, and was quite involved in the community.

“You should bring it up to City Council,” he shared. “There’s a chunk of time at every meeting for the public to share any concerns or grievances.” This conversation was my first real introduction to Bethlehem City Council.



At the time, the thought of standing in front of a room of people at a podium to talk about my noise complaints made me shudder a bit; who would be interested to hear? Were my concerns important enough for that? But knowing that there was an entity available to hear from me and my neighbors if something was troubling us—and who might be able to do something about it—made an impact. (I obviously remember the

conversation, all these years later, and here I am running for City Council.)

Needless to say, I have since attended a number of Council meetings. At every one, I admire those who take the initiative to ask their questions, voice their concerns, and share their support. I've even been inspired to take the podium myself! I have watched as members of Council have listened—some respectfully, and some, occasionally, less so. You say it yourself, Gadfly, and I agree: these meetings are the “face” of city government. They enable our residents to feel *heard*. And to me, serving all of the citizens of Bethlehem by listening, respectfully, is one of the greatest responsibilities of being on Council.

Through my work, I have had the pleasure of developing trusted relationships with clients, colleagues, and readers throughout the City. I strive to listen, genuinely, to their needs, and I take my responsibility to each of them seriously. I'd like to think that this is behavior that's come to be expected of me. I plan to bring that same trustworthy, respectful rapport to my relationships on Council—whether it be with fellow members, the Mayor, department heads, or constituents. (It's worth mentioning that in my role as director of Fig, people regularly ask me about various aspects of the state of the City and inquire as to whether I can do anything to help any number of concerns, or pass their concerns on to those who *can* do something about it. This is a big part of why I am running for Council in the first place; I want to be able to say “yes.”)

After receiving this week's prompt, I reached out to a handful of residents from different areas of the City to ask their concerns about City services. Here are some of the responses I received, in no particular order:

- Roads have been neglected for so long and the constant utility construction, ripping up the roads and patching spots here and there are so poorly done.
- As an active walker around the city, I'm saddened by the lack of attention to local parks.
- I'm disturbed by the amount of trash that seems out of control along sidewalks, near highways, streams, and just in general.

- The Boyd has sat way too long in utterly horrible condition.
- Gridlock traffic problem on the South side.
- My immediate answer is “paving the roads”. Number one. Top of the list.
- Patiently waiting for the Pedestrian Bridge from North to South.
- Lopsided attention Main Street receives.
- People experiencing homelessness – what are the city initiatives to assist? Any secular resources?
- Something like Denver’s STAR program that dispatches health care workers to some emergency calls so police aren’t always the people dispatched.
- No single hauler trash pickup.
- Fixing deteriorating roads.
- Stormwater fee – this should have been explained better/more before implementing.
- More attention to the city beyond the two blocks of Main Street that tourists visit.
- Town & Gown relationships – Moravian, Lehigh, NCC, etc.

There are repeats. There are contradictions. But I learned so much from one simple inquiry. This is the lived experience of these residents, and their input is valuable—crucial—to informing City Hall about what is working well, and what’s not.

Understanding the role of local government, let alone attending or standing up at a Council meeting, can be intimidating. But not only do I want to hear from the citizens of Bethlehem, I want to hear from as many as possible. As Councilperson, warmly inviting and empowering residents to participate will be at the core of my service. Our constituents are our best resources; they represent our neighborhoods and report their real-life experiences. They are, in essence, City Ambassadors. Their input helps make our City better.

Rachel Leon

Thank you, Gadfly, for another thought provoking prompt. The part I want to focus on is the “day-to-day lives of the average resident.” It seems like such a mundane statement, but we live out our lives in these day-to-day moments. When members of our communities are frustrated with local government it is usually a result of what happens in these day-to-day moments. An intersection that is difficult for pedestrians to navigate. Trash piling up outside of a school. The fear of overdevelopment in our neighborhoods. Lack of affordable housing. Food insecurity in areas of our City where there is limited access to a grocery store. As I speak to more and more people about their concerns, I continue to hear about all these things. We are coming out of a difficult time as a nation, and there are also concerns surrounding how our local economy will recover post pandemic. We need to be able to address all of these concerns, not just the ones that have an economic impact. As elected representatives, it is our responsibility to get into all our communities and ask what we can do for them. The key to the quality of life in our communities isn’t always more development, but we won’t know that if we aren’t asking the questions or if we are only listening to people who find a way to get our attention. It is important that we are really asking the questions, not just checking off an obligated line item in a budget meeting.



Of all of the concerns that I have heard, affordable housing seems to top the list. There are amazing people working hard to address the issue of affordable housing, and we need to continue to push forward with them. We need affordable housing, especially in our remaining mixed-income neighborhoods. We need accessible housing. Communities cannot continue to get pushed farther and farther out of their neighborhoods, so they can be replaced by people who can afford higher rents, for the sake of developer profits. Another issue that continuously comes up, and which has support from many local nonprofit organizations, is the need for a permanent homeless shelter. COVID has shown us just how vulnerable we all are. I don’t believe that we as a city can, in good conscience, put off building a shelter any longer. Homelessness was on the rise pre-pandemic and is expected to continue to rise. We need a

permanent place where members of our community can get their basic needs met. This is a matter of basic human dignity.

While affordable housing and the building of a permanent homeless shelter are some of the issues I would like to continue to see work on as a councilmember, there are many other issues that face our communities. There has been a rise in civic engagement among citizens who want to protect our historic structures and districts. Parking is increasingly hard to come by in our more densely populated areas, partly due to limited options for public transportation. Our city parks need maintaining. I believe many of these issues can be addressed through better and more communication between residents and local government. It could very well be that there is a plan in place to take care of every single concern that our communities are facing and that our community members are simply not aware of these plans. Simply posting information on a website or hosting only one meeting about something that matters to communities can have the effect of excluding a lot of people from the conversation.

So, what I would like to see improved is our approach and commitment to providing affordable housing, the construction of a permanent homeless shelter, and better communication between local government and our communities. I believe elected officials need to find better ways to go to the communities that tend to have less of a voice in local politics. If we want to understand the issues that they are facing, we can't just wait for them to come to us. A fully engaged and informed city council would be a forceful back up as the City moves forward with a new mayor.

The mayor and his staff can't know everything. It's the job of city council to make sure the mayor's plans reflect what is good for communities that they may know little about. If the mayor's plans fail, we all fail. While it may not be the job of councilmembers to fix everything, we can help the mayor know what the problems are and provide some insight on how to fix the problems. This is something I learned in the Navy. If one person doesn't fix something right, the whole ship goes down. In this respect, local governance is the responsibility of all elected officials.

Hillary Kwiatek



The services Bethlehem provides are its most direct connection to residents. And folks are never more aware of those services than when they fall short of expectations. Unfortunately, that's usually when residents need those services most. I have been knocking on doors in support of Democratic candidates in Bethlehem for more than fifteen years, and during that time I've probably heard it all: neighborhood bets on whether leaves will be picked up on the Southside or the smaller streets of the West Side, regardless of what the schedule says. A neighbor's hauler never picks up their trash, and the bags are ravaged by animals resulting in garbage strewn all over the street. Springtime potholes destroy tires and alignments. Musikfest. (I personally love Musikfest, but your mileage may vary!) Absentee landlords who don't address maintenance of their properties, endangering residents. And, of course, snow removal.

But I've also heard the good stuff: the city took care of a neighbor's complaint that someone was leaving a non-operating car to decompose in their shared alley parking area. New curb cuts make traversing neighborhood intersections safer for older residents. New playground equipment goes up. Potholes get filled. Snow, eventually, is removed.

In a municipal government, the Mayor is the executive and the Council is the legislative body. In this model, Councilmembers are sent to City Hall to represent the people of the city as a member of Congress represents them in Washington, DC.

If I am elected, I will view constituent services as, in fact, part of "my job." I will learn the ins and outs of how city services are delivered. I will keep an open line of communication with residents, and I will strive to help them solve their problems or at least point them in the right direction.

Transparency is essential in helping residents understand how and why services are delivered in the city. That's why Open Bethlehem is such a big step forward. Residents can see, in easy to read graphs, how the city is spending their tax dollars. (I tend to nerd out on data, so, yes, I was

pretty amazed to find out that the city's income from the sale of recyclable materials has plummeted over the past seven years to just 14 percent of what it was in 2013.)

But without good communication, residents won't even know such resources are available. That's why I was proud to be a member of the Connect Bethlehem working group. We surveyed residents about their awareness of and satisfaction with the ways the city communicates with them, from paper newsletters and telephone hotlines to social media accounts. From the more than 1,000 responses we received, we found a number of common themes:

- **Lack of awareness** of communications resources
- For those who are aware — concern that there are **too many communications resources** and a desire to **consolidate those resources into fewer, more centralized accounts** and tools
- A desire for **more consistent, regular communication** that is **easier to find**
- A need for a **coordinated communication strategy**, perhaps led by a dedicated staff position (“chief communications officer”)
- A desire for **more interactivity** (“two-way communication”) in the city's communications — exhibited by comments such as “They just post press releases” and “I sent them a message on FB Messenger and they didn't reply”

As part of my work on the Connecting Bethlehem working group, I had the chance to meet many city staff members from nearly every municipal department. They were all clearly committed to serving the residents of the city and doing the best job they could with the resources available.

So, I would hesitate to put forth too many proposals for changing the way city services are delivered until I have had the chance to really dive into city operations and learn them from top to bottom.

I believe the new Bethlehem app is a step in the right direction in connecting residents with city services centrally. I have already seen issues in my own neighborhood being addressed as a result of reports sent via this tool. With a new Mayor, particularly one who has a

progressive mindset with regard to communications, we can do even more.

Grace Crampsie Smith

I was fortunate to be born into a family where service to others was paramount. I literally saw on a daily basis my father, as a Police Chief, constantly respond to the calls and needs of others. Community members knew if there was a problem/issue, they could go to “Jack” and he would deal with it. He emulated to me the importance of treating others with compassion, respect, objectivity, and going to whatever lengths to resolve conflicts. He was known for his motto “It doesn’t cost you anything to be nice to people,” and I try to live his legacy every day.



My mother was the epitome of compassion for others. As the eldest of 10, mother of 7, and a nurse, caring for others was her middle name. If someone was ill or had an unmet need, they knew they could reach out to my mom and she’d be there for them.

My 6 siblings were much older than me, so I also got to experience them as role models of service/response to others. Several went into public service, and my only sister became a Sister of Mercy, literally giving her life in service and mercy to others. I always joke that having been born in between 5 brothers she had enough of men and decided to be a nun.

It is no wonder that I choose a professional path of serving those with addictions, mental health diagnoses, and developmental disabilities, as well as counseling high school students for almost 40 years.

In my tenure as city councilperson, I frequently have constituents reach out to me re: concerns. Issues range from public works (streets), safety/police, health, etc. I have responded to every issue by first and foremost gathering the facts, then reaching out to the appropriate person(s) in city administration to address the issue. I always tell fellow community members that I am here to represent and serve them so they should not hesitate to reach out to me. I also advise them of our new

Service App, which is so much easier to navigate than the past one. However, I know that not everyone can or cares to access this app.

Over time, I've had several concerns within the Moravian College area re: typical college student behaviors that are disruptive to the neighborhood- parties, loud noises, safety of nearby residents due to Covid. I reached out to the College President, College Police, and City Police Dept. to address these concerns. Given my belief it is best to meet issues head on with all involved, I initiated the Moravian Block Watch. This allowed neighbors to sit at the table with city police, Moravian Police, and Moravian Representatives to discuss and resolve presenting issues. I think we were progressing and had success in resolving some issues, but, unfortunately, we had to discontinue meetings due to Covid.

I truly believe the skills I have honed as a counselor, as well as in various areas within the human services field has been a definite advantage in serving as a councilperson. In my career, I have to mediate and resolve conflict amongst individuals and entities on a daily basis. I've learned the importance of treating all sides with respect, allowing all sides to express their concerns, and try to guide others to meeting in middle. It is also important for different sides of issues to have their consciousness raised as to the obstacles the other side may face

I never hesitate to reach out to city staff or the mayor and will continue to do so no matter who the new mayor is. I believe those within the city and the mayor know that I will always strongly advocate for those in need, from micro issues such as a potholes to macro issues such as securing inclusionary housing options for multiple income levels. Recently, when we had to implement the new stormwater fee, I noted there needed to be a tier system or appeal process, and the appeal process was added. Being a student of free/reduced lunch, I know first-hand the monetary challenges some households may face, and I will continue to advocate for those less fortunate.

In the end, in serving and responding to others within the community my golden rule will continue to be: "It doesn't cost you anything to be nice to people."

Bryan Callahan

Ed,

In the 7 plus years that I've been on Council, I am probably the most proud of the fact that City residents, taxpayers, property owners, policemen, firemen, and city workers feel comfortable enough to call me or in many cases come to my house to talk to me and confide in me. They know I will look into their particular situation and, if I have to, fight and act on their concerns!

The issues range from small concerns to much bigger concerns and problems. My favorite memory was on a Sunday morning about 6 years ago. An elderly lady came out of church service at Notre Dame on Catasauqua Road on the West side. It was early Springtime, and as she pulled out of her parking spot her front tire hit a deep pot hole that caused a flat tire on her car. She called to tell me that the tire was so badly damaged that she had to buy a new tire and get a wheel alignment that cost her almost \$250 and that she was very upset about it because that was a lot of money for her on her fixed income. As soon as I got off the call with her, I was so touched by her call, that I reached out to Public Works Director Mike Alkhal. Mike has always been a very responsive and responsible department head. I knew he would get it fixed, but I didn't think it would be the first thing the next morning. Around 9:30 AM on Monday I got another phone call from her number. She told me that she was just driving up the road where the pot hole was, and she was shocked that "my pot hole was already being fixed!" She told me that she was very thankful for me acting on her behalf. I told her that all I did was make one phone call, but that I would call Mr. Alkhal to thank him for her. That situation put a smile on my face, that one little phone call made an elderly resident feel like the City was listening to her!



On a much larger scale I've been shocked when I had several police officers tell me that the administration was sitting on and holding back from Council the fact that several months earlier a man, who was being held in police custody, had committed suicide in the basement of City

Hall or when residents have informed me about perceived retaliation from permits and inspections workers within the Community and Economic Development Department if they even dared to question the length of time it was taking to get their permit for their new garage, pool, patio or addition to their house.

I have always taken every resident's phone calls and listen to their concerns, problems, and issues with a seriousness and have acted accordingly when needed.

I truly feel that listening to our residents and being their voice is the most important job of being on Council!

Residents are welcome to fashion reflections on candidate comments, sending them to ejg1@lehigh.edu. On Gadfly we seek the good conversation that builds community, so please be courteous at all times. Gadfly retains the right to abridge and to edit your reflections and to decline posts that are repetitive or that contain personal attacks. Gadfly will publish resident reflections on the week's Forum at noon on Friday.