

Councilwoman Negrón: “our city needs your civic engagement”

The Bethlehem Gadfly City government June 27, 2020

🦋 Latest post in a series on city government 🦋

So the last 3-4 posts in this series have been about the volunteer-staffed ABCs — the **Authorities, Boards, and Commissions** — that in the June 16 City Council meeting Councilwoman Van Wirt called, in a phrase so wonderful Gadfly keeps repeating it, “cloistered venues of power.”

And the Gadfly followers are smart people.

So you knew where he was going to end up.

Yes, with a recruitment pitch.

Gadfly is “the pied piper of civic engagement,” as a blessed follower tagged him.

On which ABC would you like to serve? On which ABC have you offered to serve?

Council, as we saw in the last post, is hot to improve the selection process.

Now we need good people to go along with that.

Here below is an oldie but goodie from Councilwoman Negrón, who, if you listened to the audio from the June 16 meeting in the last Gadfly post, was “on fire” about the importance of the ABCs and Council’s role in them.

Gadfly wrote you about her *Morning Call* article **last year** when it came out. It bears another read. And some action on your part.

Olga Negrón, “Your View by Bethlehem councilwoman: Want to help democracy? Serve on a government board.” Morning Call, August 31, 2019.



Voting in national elections is important, but it's only one of many ways that citizens can fulfill their duty to contribute to the governance of their communities and country.

I'm Councilwoman Olga Negron, vice president of Bethlehem City Council and the first woman of color elected to Bethlehem City Council. Getting elected to City Council was not a matter of chance or luck. I've been civically engaged all my life. Before running for local office, I served in many volunteer positions within the city, such as on the Planning Commission, the Public Library Board and many other nonprofit boards.

As a member of these governing bodies, and now as an elected official, I'm here to tell you that our city needs your civic engagement.

A few highly visible decision-making positions in local government are elected positions and each of us has to be a resident of our municipality in order to hold that post (mayor, city council, etc.).

However, that's not the only way to be part of the decisions about what happens in our city. There are many, other extremely important nonelected positions in local government that need to be filled by volunteers, such as positions on the Public Library Board, Fine Arts Commission, Housing Authority, Human Relations Commission, Board of Historical and Architectural Review, City Planning Commission, Environmental Advisory Council, Historic Conservation Commissions, Parking Authority, Recreation Commission, Redevelopment Authority, Zoning Hearing Board. (A full list for the Bethlehem can be found at: www.bethlehem-pa.gov/about/authorities/index.html).

Although some positions have residency requirements, in many cases people who sit on these commissions and boards don't live in our city.

We also have individuals who have been members of the same board or commission for 15 to 20 years, and some individuals are members of two or three boards at the same time. Why, you might wonder?

Some of these positions require an expertise (electrical, health, financial, etc.). And these are also nonpaid positions, which makes it more difficult to find individuals willing to serve.

Many times when there are vacancies, they need to be filled rather quickly and the person charged with selecting nominees is “stuck” with the same few individuals.

However, it’s important to know that not all positions require a specific expertise; most just require a dedicated person with common sense and love for our city who is willing to be the voice of their community.

As a member of city council, I understand that one of my roles is to provide a check and balance on the mayor of the city and at the same time to be the voice of the people.

But the people in our city have diverse voices, and what we need is more of that diversity working in our government. That’s why I’m reaching out to challenge every single one of you to get civically engaged, to share your talents and put them to work for the betterment of our city. Don’t wait until you are negatively impacted by a government decision to get involved in local decisions.

A functioning democracy requires citizens who care what their government is doing and who put the time in to make it work for them. At the municipal level, you can have an impact on the political.

When citizens get involved in local government, they make it possible for government to do more than elected officials could accomplish alone.

Just this year, the city’s Environmental Advisory Council proposed several ordinances that would otherwise never become a possibility.

When members of local boards and commissions tell us what they think is good for the city, their views can have a significant impact on the decisions that elected officials make.

By getting involved in local government, you can make a big difference in the governance of our collective life and community long before the 2020 presidential election arrives.

The link to the City page above in the Councilwoman’s article says to contact the person on the ABC in which you are interested, but you should also contact the Mayor’s office. to be continued . . .