



Bethlehem's Year of Floyd (5): Reimagining Public Safety

The Bethlehem Gadfly George Floyd anniversary May 15, 2021

 *Latest in a series of posts regarding the George Floyd anniversary* 

Gadfly is modestly proposing that City Council mark the anniversary of George Floyd's death at a Public Safety meeting on May 25, 2021. A year gives us some distance on our efforts to act on the significance of his death and a perspective on the challenges it presented to the City. Gadfly continues here a quasi-history of the "Year of Floyd" as seen through his eyes and the pages of the blog. One man's version. As always, Gadfly invites you to join in.

Gadfly approaches this final chapter of his quasi-history with great frustration.

One way to think about the City's response to the murder of George Floyd is to think of two tracks, tracks birthed in the June 9 letter from Councilfolk Reynolds and Crampsie Smith: one track outward embodied in the creation of a Community Engagement Initiative and one track inward in an analysis of police policies and practice.

Gadfly has already suggested that the CEI in the way he understood it has not materialized, even though concept-creator Councilman Reynolds as recently as Thursday in the PBS debate speaks of it as if in operation.

If on May 25 we have a meeting to mark the George Floyd anniversary and we present a report card on our year's work, what will we show? Join me in thinking about this:

- Renewed emphasis on non-law enforcement interaction with the community embodied in a program Gadfly by chance has heard Chief Kott refer to as the "Neighborhood Outreach Initiative," but a program which has not been explained in detail publicly as far as he knows: Now this is a good thing. And Gadfly hopes the program is

successful. And it could be explained at the May 25 meeting. Council has been prodding the Chief in this direction, but it doesn't seem she needs much prodding if dancing the Salsa at the Latinx Block Party is any indication. Chief Kott seems by nature a community person. This program will improve the face of the department and the interface of police and community members. But Gadfly hears an activist at the July 7 City Council meeting saying that more pizza parties won't cut it. And he agrees.

- More transparency on the part of the police department: This is also a good thing. We were the first department in the Valley to publish our Use of Force policy. We even published a report on the use of force. Now, again, these are good things. Gadfly also remembers a promise to produce such a report every year. But, Gadfly says, *but* we are still operating at the periphery. We have not yet had near enough analysis of such reports (what happened to Prof Ochs?) nor investigated other lacunae. Without implying that there is any kind of cancer at the core as we are learning about police departments in Minneapolis and other places, Gadfly feels that the death of Floyd mandated Council to do a deep review of department practice. We tend to say we “learned from our mistakes” (past Chief Diluzio referring to the Herko fiasco), that we have double accreditation, a fact so rare as to render us elite, and to talk of ourselves uncritically as one of the best departments in the state. The times require more than that rhetoric. Gadfly, who had more time to binge-watch the Chauvin trial than most, remembers the talking heads saying over and over again that eyes must be put on police practice on at least three crucial points: recruiting/hiring, training, internal affairs/disorderly conduct. We need to do that. Gadfly remembers Chief Diluzio responding to a question by saying that he has fired officers, as if simply saying that satisfied our desire for assurance that there is a process to weed out the bad seeds. Gadfly remembers Councilman Callahan asking (rather sheepishly, in fact — not the forceful tone he is able to mount) Chief Kott about training at the March 2 Public Safety meeting and receiving in reply a vague general answer of self-assurance that training is ok (**min. 1:05:40**). We need more than that. Gadfly has no explicit sense of what training and how much our officers receive. We need to know that in detail.

- A **pilot program** linking the police department with the Health Bureau (ha! as if the Health Bureau hasn't had enough to do during the pandemic): Now this is the third good thing we could say at a May 25 meeting to mark Floyd's death. And the pilot will be in operation about six months then, a ripe time for a preliminary status report. But Gadfly has to say frankly that this program doesn't seem much in the way of a response to the tragedy. In **announcing the pilot program**, the Mayor bally-hoo'd it pretty well: the City, he said, has "learned from reflection" and is engaging in "re-investment in our community." But, frankly, Gadfly was not much impressed by the reflection or the investment. The program seems to be funded by freebies and reassignments. Gadfly didn't see much re-investment. He didn't sense strain or painful re-allocation. And the program, good as it is, and certainly we hope it is successful, does not at all confront head on what Gadfly sees is the more pressing problem — which is the tragedies that actually often occur and which Gadfly has chronicled in detail in these pages when police make "first contact" with a person in an active episode of mental health distress. The pilot program encourages an officer to refer a person he or she identifies as needing help to a mental health specialist, good, but what we also need is training for officers who are called to a home, say, where a person in crisis with a gun has locked himself in a bedroom. Or maybe we shouldn't send an officer at those times. While officer referral might lessen the possibility that such encounters occur, we need to focus on how to handle a "hot" situation. Public Safety chair Colon indicated that we would have a meeting early in the new year, in January, on such things and those mentioned in the above bullet. But that never happened.

Gadfly is going on too long.

But he must say that when he writes the full history of the City, there is so much more that he will want to go in to:

- The Gordian knot needing an Alexander that kept us from getting a Public Safety meeting till 2 1/2 months after May 25
- A Back the Blue rally before a Council meeting
- The duel between Lehigh Valley Good Neighbors Alliance and Lehigh Valley Stands Up, petitions and otherwise

- LVGNA's claim to victory
- LVGNA's lack of substantive value and probably actual detriment to the conversation
- How we could only manage 2 Public Safety committee meetings related to this subject in a year
- Chief Diluzio!
- Prof Ochs as MIA
- the lack of a budget discussion when it was kinda promised
- great, great participation at meetings on 7/7 and 8/11
- but then the seeming lack of effect and impact of that great participation at both meetings

Well, time to end this 5-part virtual prospectus for a full-fledged history of Bethlehem's "Year of Floyd."

Gadfly's cranky. (Nothing new, you say.)

His anthems were:

Reynolds: "I think we do have an opportunity in the coming weeks and months to make tangible progress on ending systemic racism and creating more equitable systems."

Smith: "I'm here because I believe that we are at an important moment in our community's history, and we have an opportunity to do something truly momentous."

Not much to show.

But he'll keep singing.

Let's have that May 25 meeting and kick ourselves in the butt.