

The community will only improve when trust is built between city hall and the residents

The Bethlehem Gadfly | City government, Serious Issues | November 23, 2019

 Latest in a series of posts on City Government 

Dana Grubb is a lifelong resident of the City of Bethlehem who worked 27 years for the City of Bethlehem in the department of community and economic development, as sealer of weights and measures, housing rehabilitation finance specialist, grants administrator, acting director of community and economic development, and deputy director of community development.

ref: “I feel community policing is very important”

Gadfly,

I met Lisa for breakfast recently. It was nice to reconnect with her because she was very active in the community when I was a city official and I would attend block watches regularly. I and the then Chief Housing Inspector Mike Palos were regulars at block watch meetings back then usually along with a Community Police Officer who worked out of a substation, and who rode a bike throughout their patrol areas. City hall connected with residents back then through our presence in the neighborhoods, and our accessibility in our offices beyond. Residents could call us at anytime, and we’d get their issues addressed. I could list upwards to 20 officers who were true community policeman, who had developed relationships by being out on the street riding and could count on support during investigations. We were all accessible, and the public could rely on us to get on whatever the matter was.

I understand that nobody from Community and Economic Development attends [block watches] regularly if at all these days and that employees have received direction to not attend. I can’t tell you the last time I saw a cop on a bike, stopped and chatting with several residents.

Back in the day those officers took ownership of their bicycle patrol areas, and the residents adopted them and made them their own. Over time many of those connections were lost as officers advanced in rank and moved around in the Police Department.

Mike Palos and I were “Bethlehem guys,” having grown up in Bethlehem. A number of the officers were as well. The Community Police Officers riding their bikes compare very favorably to the imprint today’s Mounted Police Patrol makes throughout the town.

Getting back to Lisa, she was one of those Bethlehem neighbors who worked closely with every one of us, because she cared. She’s not alone, but if city hall remains aloof to neighborhoods around town, people like Lisa can grow frustrated. An occasional incursion into a neighborhood to install smoke detectors and maybe sweep the streets and do some exterior inspections is only a piece of the equation. You need city hall to be there, to create points of contact that are responsive and productive.

It was great to watch Lisa turn out. There are more residents who will do that. Some did on Main Street, but at the end of the day the community will only improve when trust is built between city hall and the residents. That takes time, empathy, and action. As deputy director of community development, I was constantly reinforcing with employees, our inspectors, secretaries, and administrative staff that we needed to treat each situation like it was happening next door to us, our parents, our best friends. With that in mind, city staff could relate and provide a higher level of service to Bethlehem. It’s an attitude, something many of my generation of city employees lament has been lost.

Dana >