

This Blog: An Archive of Public Comment, and an Example

The Bethlehem Gadfly Gadfly's posts, Serious Issues September 29, 2018

Gadfly knows the golf course issue is over. In fact, passing the course this morning, Gadfly could see that tree work has noticeably commenced. But one of the reasons Gadfly came out of retirement and started this blog was to provide an archive of citizen comments, a record of public participation. Over and over again Gadfly has seen commenters come to the podium at Council meetings with carefully thought out and written texts. Gadfly has been impressed over and over again at the high quality of these public comments and felt it a shame that, although covered well in Mrs. Kelchner's minutes, the actual "voices" of the commenters evaporated from public view where residents not at the meeting might well find them of value. The blog started too late to cover the golf course issue from the beginning, but Nicole's reporting linked below performs that function well. What Gadfly wants to do here is ask Council commenters to think of this blog as a place to archive those comments. Send your prepared texts to Gadfly. And to give you a specific example — regardless of where you stood on the golf course issue — of the thoughtful, courteous public discourse of which Bethlehem can be proud.

Barbara Diamond enjoys retirement as Lehigh University Director of Foundation Relations by engaging in various activities and organizations hopefully for the betterment of the community. Her particular interests at the moment are preventing gun violence, local government ethics reform, and Bethlehem Democratic Committee work.

Remarks to City Council RE: Golf Course (Sept 18, 2018)

Since the last CC meeting I have been looking into golfing and golf courses. Golf is in decline across the US and even around the world. I am concerned that investing so much in the golf course is not going to solve the problem of profitability. Interest in golf has been declining for almost 2 decades because it is, according to surveys, too slow, takes too much time, costs too much, is too difficult to play especially for beginners and is seen by millennials as just not cool.

According to the National Golf Foundation, young people are not interested — there has been a 30% decline among 18-34-year-olds over past 20 years — so there is a pipeline problem for the future. Lots of measures indicate waning interest: TV viewing is down, equipment purchases and manufacturing were down by 28% in 2014 — which led to retailers jettisoning products, floor space, and personnel — and, of course, rounds played are down.

With fewer people playing, golf courses are closing — over 800 in the last decade — and the number is accelerating. In 2018 only 9.6% of US population plays golf. It is hard to see how improvements to the course will revive what appears to be dying interest in the game.

Another consideration is that there are 16 public courses in NOCO and Lehigh CO and another 6 in Bucks Co. Our region seems well served by public courses.

There is also the issue of environmental impact — golf courses are notorious for their use of harmful pesticides, fertilizers, fungicides, herbicides, and water. Our budget in Bethlehem for these products just on the golf course is \$66,000.

In Bethlehem 750 residents use the golf course per year. Considering all the above is this \$3M investment wise? In your committee discussion about improving the golf course's profitability, did you consider the possibility of re-purposing this very desirable green space as some other kind of recreational asset — something that would be appealing and used by a greater number of Bethlehem residents?

I am not opposed to borrowing money to devote to recreational opportunities for our city. I am opposed to devoting \$3m to improve a facility that is used by a small fraction of Bethlehem residents for a sport that is on the wane, while, according to the 2018 Outdoor Foundation, running, jogging, and walking for exercise are now the most popular forms of outdoor activities.

So I ask that you pause this plan and think of the golf course as an opportunity to consider creatively and with vision how this extraordinary property might be used to enhance existing and planned parks and recreational opportunities.

For example, is it possible to improve the 9-hole and re-purpose the 18-hole? I also support the feasibility study for the Pedestrian bridge as a way to further link recreation opportunity on both sides of the river. Imagine how re-purposing the golf course with walking/ biking paths linking with the pedestrian bridge could enhance Bethlehem as a destination? That would be much better use of economic development grants and taxpayer dollars, at least in my mind.

But I would further suggest that you consider holding a couple of town hall meetings so the public can have input on how this valuable recreational resource can best meet the needs and preferences for Bethlehem residents.

One more suggestion is act to preserve this property for use for recreation rather than development.

Barbara

“Bethlehem Mayor Robert Donchez is pitching a \$1.75 million proposal to get the city’s cash-strapped golf course into better playing condition.” Nicole Radzievich, “Bethlehem to sink \$1.75 million into golf course.” *Morning Call*, August 30, 2018.

<http://www.mcall.com/news/local/bethlehem/mc-nws-bethlehem-golf-course-improvements-20180828-story.html>

“Bethlehem City Council backed a \$1.75 million makeover of its popular but cash-strapped golf course, part of Mayor Robert Donchez’s plan to turn around the finances without bringing in a private operator.”

Nicole Radzievich, “Bethlehem tees up \$1.75 million makeover of golf course.” *Morning Call*, September 6, 2018.

<http://www.mcall.com/news/local/bethlehem/mc-nws-bethlehem-golf-borrowing-20180904-story.html>

“The Bethlehem Golf Club has been running a deficit for 10 years. Why wasn’t the restructuring that is being planned implemented at some point during those 10 years? With 10 years of mismanagement, I think the city should hire an outside operator.”

Deborah Helms, “Readers React: Bethlehem golf course mismanaged.” *Morning Call*, September 12, 2018.

<http://www.mcall.com/opinion/letters/mc-rea-helms-bethlehem-golf-course-20180911-story.html>

“Bethlehem City Council on Tuesday approved borrowing \$1.75 million and applying for grants to improve its popular but cash-strapped golf course, over some objections that the money would be better used on facilities more residents use.”

Nicole Radzievich, “Bethlehem backs borrowing \$1.75 million for golf course.” *Morning Call*, September 19, 2018.

<http://www.mcall.com/news/local/bethlehem/mc-nws-bethlehem-golf-course-money-20180917-story.html>

“Golf isn’t exactly in our budget, let alone the majority of Bethlehem residents. The rich are getting richer and will always take care of themselves first. Bethlehem City Council proved that on Tuesday.”

Maggie Riegel, “Readers React: Spending \$1.75 million on Bethlehem golf club is a swing and a miss.” *Morning Call*, September 20, 2018.

<http://www.mcall.com/opinion/letters/mc-rea-riegel-bethlehem-golf-course-spending-20180920-story.html>