

# Mr. Callahan has now plunged us into a contentious spectacle that will tarnish reputations and erode public trust

The Bethlehem Gadfly City government, Ethics, Serious Issues December 3, 2019

 *Latest in a series of posts on Ethics and City Government* 

*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.*

Dear Gadfly:

The escalating situation between Councilman Callahan and the mayor provides the opportunity to revisit the effort two years ago to pass an ethics ordinance, which aimed to strengthen the ethics environment in Bethlehem with high standards now in practice by many municipalities. The effort was launched by Councilwoman Olga Negron and included Councilman Michael Colon and a number of community members. It had the endorsement of the Northampton County League of Women Voters and was considered a model for other communities by the state LWV.

Unfortunately other members of the council at that time (Councilmen Callahan, Reynolds, Martel, and Evans) opposed the effort, and it was defeated. Instead, they passed a mandatory training ordinance and a gifts ordinance, both of which were window dressing — they looked good

to the public but didn't accomplish much (I can explain why on a later post) as demonstrated by the current situation.

In opposing the ethics ordinance, Mr. Callahan and the others cited the existing process of reporting accusations of improper conduct to the State Ethics Commission for investigation as the proper way to handle these issues and that there was no need for the city to enact anything more robust. In his [November 25] press conference, Mr. Callahan admitted that he didn't follow this procedure. It would be useful to know why he didn't pursue this avenue; he was certainly aware of it. I hope he will explain why.

So instead of filing a complaint with the state, Mr. Callahan asked the mayor to launch an investigation into a senior member of his own administration. Needless to say, it is not a sound practice for an administration to investigate itself. No matter the outcome, the results are bound to be unsatisfactory because the independence of the investigation can and likely will be questioned, as happened here. Mr. Callahan has now publicly made serious but unfounded accusations of unethical conduct by the mayor, a member of his administration, and a fellow councilman. With no confirmation or exoneration, the public is left to wonder about wrongdoing.

So in the absence of the well-defined, independent, confidential, and fair process in which to investigate and adjudicate his complaint that we could have had with the ethics ordinance, Mr. Callahan has now plunged us into a contentious spectacle that will tarnish reputations, including possibly his own, and erode public trust in their local government.

I hope this incident will serve as an impetus for city council to dust off the ethics ordinance, update it, and finally pass legislation that will provide the kinds of safeguards municipalities need to both aid public officials in serving the public interest and ensure confidence in our local government.

Barbara