

# Gadfly council forum #7: the state of the city

[The Bethlehem Gadfly Forum](#), [Gadfly Forum](#) May 2, 2021

🦋 *Latest in a series of posts on the Gadfly Forum* 🦋

## The Council candidates comparison chart

**Candidates: Callahan, Crampsie Smith, Kwiatek, Leon, Wilhelm**

### The prompt:

The Mayor delivered the annual **State of the City** address April 16.

For this Forum response, Gadfly asked the candidates to think of the state of the city, the Mayor's state of the city address, the content of that address, criticism of or additions to the address, the way in which that address is given, focusing more resident attention on it, and options or supplements to it.

Big open range again for the candidates to roam in.

Listen to Gadfly's full prompt [here](#).

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### Kiera Wilhelm

Ed, I can't believe we're only three weeks away from the May 18 primary election. The time has flown by. Your latest question, as you know, touches

on a very important foundation of my campaign: warmly inviting residents to be informed, and participate. Communicating with constituents through your blog has been an important part of that.

My February press release announcing my



candidacy stated it:

*Ms. Wilhelm says she will prioritize more frequent, more accessible communication with the citizens of Bethlehem—via an enhanced and easy-to-navigate digital hub, a more robust social media presence, and, when it is safe, in-person conversations in the neighborhoods where people live and work. “I believe that better, warmer communication between a government and its citizens can lead to increased civic participation—an engaged community of residents who, having been thoughtfully informed and actively invited to participate, do,” she said. “This can mean anything from increased voter participation, to more trees planted, to volunteering, community gardens, more public art, and so much more. Civic participation contributes to the health and well-being of individual citizens, and to the community as a whole.”*

Looking back, my path to city Council has been paved with “invitations”—even (mostly?) inadvertent ones. When I returned to Bethlehem in 2013, my core group of friends included (and still does!) people who were involved in this city in a number of ways: performing artists, small business owners, generally engaged and concerned citizens. In the last four and a half years as Director of Fig, I became further entrenched in not only the small business community but the community at large. Being out and about, learning and telling the stories of hard-working people dedicated to serving the city in a number of ways, informed and enlightened me. It made me want to learn more, do more. My connections presented opportunities to become more involved, in a number of arts, education, and other community organizations. And now here I am.

City Hall has made important strides in becoming more accessible to residents, and I’m pleased about that. This year’s State of the City address was streamed live, and I watched it with interest. Its many positive messages were accompanied by colorful, engaging photos of places and faces I recognized: the Southside ambassadors; our new police chief, Michelle Kott; our incredible public health team; business owners and other members of the community. I loved seeing renderings of our new food co-op and other projects on the horizon. And I wondered how many others were watching. We can, and should, build on the

efforts already made to ensure that City information is reaching as many of our citizens as possible.

Communication with stakeholders is crucial—people and institutions who are investing themselves in the growth of the City need to be kept informed and included. But it’s important to remember that the citizens of Bethlehem are stakeholders, too. As a member of Council (and a former teacher) I’m committed to striving to continually make information not only readily available and accessible but easy to understand. The language we use in communicating information is as important as how and how often we communicate (terms such as “LERTA” and “Enterprise Zone” may not be familiar to most residents, for example). Furthermore, we have so much to learn from the citizens of Bethlehem. Getting information not just *to* them but *from* them will inform our work as public servants in deeply valuable and meaningful ways. We can provide unintimidating opportunities for residents to share their perspectives. Not just at the City Hall rotunda but in the neighborhoods where they live and work.

Not everybody is given a natural path to information and engagement. I feel fortunate that my path led me here. As I was invited in, I want to invite others in, too. We all benefit when we hear from all voices, and I’m eager to be part of a City Council that welcomes and engages with those voices.

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### **Hillary Kwiatek**

When I heard the Gadfly’s question about the state of the city, I was reminded of one of the guidelines for effective dialogue that we use for

conversations across difference among faculty, students and staff at Lehigh: *Notice Process and Content.*



When viewed from this perspective, we see that the process of the presentation of the annual State of the City address to the chamber of commerce influences its content. A chamber of commerce audience is thought to be more interested in economic development than other areas of municipal government or broader issues such as racial justice or climate change. If this is the only time that a mayor reports on the “state of the city,” that address will fall well short of what our residents want and need to know about.

The economic development and vitality of our city are crucial aspects of the overall health of our city. And the annual address to the chamber of commerce, which includes member businesses of every size, is an absolutely valid exercise. And, at the same time, I think it points to a need for a much more robust and inclusive communication plan for our city going forward.

As part of Councilman Reynolds’ “Bethlehem 2017” initiative, which also included the Open Data ordinance and Climate Action Plan, I served on a working group focused on communications and engagement between the city and our residents. This group, “Connecting Bethlehem,” launched a survey in 2019 to learn more about how the people who live, learn and work in Bethlehem find information about the city; their level of awareness about the city’s communication channels; and their satisfaction with the amount and quality of communication coming from the city.

We received nearly 1,400 replies to our survey. The data showed that while people felt largely positive about the effectiveness and value of the city’s communications, they also found the many channels available, from hotlines to social media, disorganized and confusing. Respondents indicated there were too many places to find information in some cases, and not enough in others. Community members were seeking a unified voice that they could rely on for consistent messaging about the aspects of municipal government that mattered to them.

One more note on the survey. It was important to us that the survey be offered in both English and Spanish, and Councilwoman Negron kindly translated the survey for the working group. We launched the English and Spanish versions together; however, in the end we received only a

handful of responses to the Spanish language survey. We saw that as evidence that even our communications efforts to gather information about communications weren't reaching a large part of our community, at least partially due to a digital divide. This led us to recommend that the city continue to communicate in both print and digital formats.

Finally, the state of the city shouldn't only be addressed once a year in one place. There should be continual **two-way** communication between residents and its government.

I believe that City Council members have a role to play in city/community communications. Council members can serve as a connection between residents and the government, and I believe they can create greater engagement from residents by explaining how the city's many ordinances and approval processes work. I would point to Dr. Van Wirt as an exemplary councilwoman in this respect (among others!).

As a councilwoman, I would see this as a key responsibility of the role and would strive to be as accessible as possible. For example, I want City Council to conduct town halls and other meetings in neighborhoods throughout our community at times and places that are convenient to residents on topics such as the Climate Action Plan, economic development, public safety and more.

If I am fortunate enough to be elected, I will work with the administration to build on the Connecting Bethlehem survey findings to develop robust, inclusive, and unified communications that reach all of our diverse communities.

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**Bryan Callahan**

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**Rachel Leon**

Once again, I thank you for your thought provoking prompts Sir Gadfly. I enjoy the time we are given to sit with these prompts.

**This week's prompt** reminded me of the TED Talk given by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie on the dangers of a single story. She highlights the pitfalls of only viewing a situation from one point of view. She ends by saying “when we reject the single story, when we realize that there is never a single story about any place, we regain a kind of paradise.” I was also reminded of one of my favorite quotes by James Baldwin when he states, “I love America more than any other country in the world, and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually.”



I love Bethlehem more than any other city in the world and for that reason I feel it is my responsibility to be realistic in my description of the state of Bethlehem. When Bethlehem is only spoken about in terms of economic development, we are given a single story of the state of Bethlehem. A story that is financially focused and not family focused. I'm not naïve to the needs of economic stability in a city. I support responsible development and believe in the small businesses that continue to make Bethlehem a totally unique place. However, it is important to be able to point out obvious issues that we are facing as a city. A critique of a specific initiative or practice that residents notice is not a condemnation of the City. It is a call to pay attention, so that a situation does not progress to a point that we are unable to return from. I can say that I appreciate Lehigh's commitment to investing in the business district in South Bethlehem. I can also say that the trend of student housing in South Bethlehem has made it increasingly difficult for families to find affordable housing in an area that has always been affordable to our residents. I can commend the revitalization of the Memorial Pool and still express concern as to when Yosko Pool will be prioritized. The complex at Third and New is a point of pride for some but a reminder of concerns left unaddressed to others.

When the state of the city is spoken about, I would love to hear the good and the bad. Where are we now? Where are we going? What have we lost sight of along the way, and how do we intend to make it right? The state

of the city should express the true diversity of the city, because if it doesn't, we risk perpetuating the dangers of a single story.

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**Grace Crampsie Smith**

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*Residents are welcome to fashion reflections on candidate comments, sending them to [ejg1@lehigh.edu](mailto:ejg1@lehigh.edu). On Gadfly we seek the good conversation that builds community, so please be courteous at all times. Gadfly retains the right to abridge and to edit your reflections and to decline posts that are repetitive or that contain personal attacks. Gadfly will publish resident reflections on the week's Forum at noon on Friday.*

**The Bethlehem Gadfly**