

Decorum d'issue at City Council last night

The Bethlehem Gadfly | City government, Ethics, Serious Issues | November 20, 2019

 *Latest in a series of posts on City Government* 

So Gadfly always tells you that you can't tell a meeting from its agenda.

Look what happened last night at City Council.

The Mayor and Councilman Callahan kind of getting in to it.

Chew on the news stories.

Gadfly will go deeper next time.

Sara Satullo, "Bethlehem mayor clashes with councilman over 'unwarranted personal attack'." lehighvalleylive.com, November 20, 2019.

Bethlehem's mayor on Tuesday urged his city council to return to the decorum it's typically known for and threatened changes if members of his cabinet are again subjected to "an unwarranted personal attack."

While Mayor Bob Donchez never addressed Councilman Bryan Callahan by name, his comments were prompted by recent heated exchanges between Callahan and fellow council members and the mayor's top staff members. After the meeting, the mayor said he did not name Callahan because everyone knew who he was talking about.

"I am not talking about votes. I am talking (about) provocative comments and personal attacks, which seem to originate from a member of city council," Donchez said reading from a four-page speech during Tuesday night's council meeting. "While, for the most part, meetings proceed normally, the departures are having a disproportionate negative impact on working relationships and council's reputation."

Callahan argued he wants to debate city issues in the open, not in a backroom, and said he felt it was his duty as a councilman to alert the mayor to potential wrongdoing.

“I don’t think any of us want to stifle debate,” the mayor said. “It’s the tone.”

The mayor felt he had to speak up on the heels of a Nov. 6 council meeting where Callahan accused city Director of Community and Economic Development Alicia Miller Karner of “unethical” behavior. It came after months of council meetings devolving during the new business portion of meetings where Callahan laid out his concerns and council President Adam Waldron sought to rein him in and urged him to respect his colleagues.

“The personal attack was unprovoked, out of order, without cause and completely out of line,” Donchez said Tuesday during the meeting. Donchez spent 18 years on council and is in his sixth year as mayor. “The members of my administration are professionals. They work hard for the city and value the working relationship they have with city council.”

Callahan’s allegation stems from Karner’s role on a city committee tasked with evaluating requests-for-proposals from developers interested in getting in on the Bethlehem Parking Authority’s new Polk Street parking garage.

The city committee recommended the authority select Nova Development and Allied Building Corporation’s proposal. But the authority board [opted to go with a Peron Development](#) and J.G. Petrucci Co. plan that offered \$200,000 more for the land. In a memo, the city committee said the difference in purchase price was not the only financial aspect to consider and pointed to the large gap in contracted parking spaces. Callahan questioned whether Karner inappropriately lobbied the authority to select the Nova/Allied proposal.

Councilman Callahan's brother and former city Mayor John Callahan is director of business development for Peron, owned by developer Michael Perrucci.

Following the meeting, Donchez said there was no merit to the accusation following a review by Business Manager Eric Evans and city Solicitor William P. Leeson. The mayor noted he recused himself from the investigation because his son works for Perrucci's law firm.

If there is another "unwarranted attack" the mayor threatened to end the city's 58-year tradition of having the mayor's cabinet members attend council meetings to explain items on the agenda, answer questions and try to resolve citizens' issues.

"I will not subject members of my administration to any more personal attacks in the future," the mayor vowed.

At council's Nov. 13 budget hearing, things got tense between Callahan, a city official and members of council as the councilman accused the city of "sticking it" to kids using the driving range when charging them for a full of bucket of balls. He was urging discounted pricing for the golf balls similar to the discounted youth golf rounds.

Callahan again raised the same concern Tuesday evening during a budget vote on the golf course fund, but took a much more collegial approach, urging his colleagues to support his suggestion that there be a discounted youth rate.

"I would recommend this vote for the kids," Callahan said.

Waldron told Callahan he appreciated the way he laid out his thoughts Tuesday evening and noted that the councilman would need to bring forward a separate resolution to change the fee.

Nicole Radzievich, "Bethlehem Mayor Robert Donchez criticizes councilman for 'unwarranted personal attack'." Morning Call, November 20, 2019.

Bethlehem Mayor Robert Donchez on Tuesday said he would consider changing the 57-year tradition of cabinet members attending City Council meetings if there's another "unwarranted personal attack" on a member of his administration like the one Councilman Bryan Callahan made at a recent council meeting.

Reading from a four-page speech before City Council, Donchez did not mention Callahan by name or the details of the comments he found objectionable. The mayor made a reference to the Nov. 6 meeting when Callahan called the actions of a top mayor's aide "unethical" and last Thursday's budget hearing where Callahan had sometimes testy exchanges with council members during discussion on the city's golf course.

Donchez said his comments were not prompted by differences in policy but the tone of "one member of council" whose attacks were "unprovoked, out of order, without cause and completely out of line." "I will not subject members of my administration to any more personal attacks in the future," he said.

Callahan said he would reserve his response to Donchez's remarks and likely hold a news conference. He added that he has the right to point out a possible impropriety as he sees it and debate in the open rather than in back rooms.

"The fact that I like to debate in the open is a good thing," Callahan said. "I think the residents want it."

Donchez, mayor for six years and councilman for 18 years, said council has a reputation of preserving political decorum and professionalism even during the most heated debates, including over whether a casino

should be built in Bethlehem, but there have been moments of departure in recent months.

“While, for the most part, the meetings proceed normally, the departures are having a disproportionate negative impact on working relationships and council’s reputation,” he said. “Council members have been unfairly challenged to choose between engaging at the risk of escalation or answer with silence.”

Councilman J. William Reynolds on Tuesday thanked the mayor for speaking up about what he agreed to be a breakdown in decorum at council meetings.

Over the last few months, Council President Adam Waldron has told Callahan he was being disrespectful to colleagues and called those moments at the meetings “cringe-worthy” and “embarrassing.” Council members Paige Van Wirt and Olga Negron have called points of order because Callahan was violating its rules on decorum, such as assigning motives to actions. Reynolds, a one-time political ally of Callahan’s and a possible rival in the next mayor election, has said Callahan has no working relationship with council members, a characterization Callahan objects to.

Callahan, a two-term councilman and chairman of council’s finance committee, has defended his behavior. He said his questions are legitimate, he has a right to air his opinions and other council members violate the rules of order and make snide remarks without being called on it.

Callahan tangled with Reynolds at an Aug. 20 meeting over a zoning hearing board appointment, accusing him of hypocritical behavior. On Nov. 6, he called actions of Alicia Miller Karner, city director of community and economic development, as “unethical” during a discussion that began with questions about a South Side planning study. After that comment, Waldron said he hoped Karner, who was sitting on

the edge of her seat, would not “lower herself” to respond, and then she pushed back in her seat and did not respond.

Karner, who was not at Tuesday’s meeting, said in an interview Wednesday that she has acted ethically in her 22 years of public service, but it was hard to address Callahan’s criticism without details. She said she would be happy to clear up any misunderstandings Callahan may have heard from others.

And last Thursday, during a lengthy discussion about the city’s golf course, Callahan, council members and a golf official sometimes talked over each other as Callahan questioned why the city was “sticking it” to kids by charging them the full price for a bucket of balls. The city offers discounted prices for youth golf rounds and season passes, he pointed out. Callahan said he would rather a kid drive balls on the course than be up to no good somewhere else. A city official said it was industry standard, and Councilwoman Grace Crampsie Smith noted the city offers free and discounted golf through youth programs including the First Tee.

When Van Wirt asked to be recognized to pose a “budget question,” Callahan said he wasn’t finished and to “take a seat for a second.” A few minutes later, he called her rude when she asked to be recognized again before he was done with his questions. Later during that budget hearing, Waldron admonished Callahan for interrupting him and “just about everybody in this room.”

“No, she interrupted me,” Callahan had said Feb. 13, pointing at Van Wirt.