

“A person who is struggling with alcohol and drug abuse doesn’t need a guy with a gun”

The Bethlehem Gadfly George Floyd killing, Police July 18, 2020

 *Latest in a series of posts responding to the George Floyd killing* 

from Christina Tatu, “Allentown City Council divided over controversial police video and calls for reform.” Morning Call, July 17, 2020.

Allentown City Council is divided over whether a police officer acted correctly when he restrained a man outside of St. Luke’s Hospital-Sacred Heart last weekend by pressing his knee against the man’s head.

Polled Friday before the Lehigh County district attorney announced that the takedown was “reasonable” and that the two officers involved would not be charged, three council members said they believe the police acted appropriately, while two others said they acted too harshly. In addition, Joshua Siegel, who did not return a call or email, has proposed police reforms, and on Wednesday apologized to Edward Borrero Jr., the man the police restrained.

Council President Daryl Hendricks and Councilman Ed Zucal, both former Allentown police officers, said they believe officers acted correctly when they restrained Borrero, 37, of Allentown, who was stumbling down Chew Street around 6:30 p.m. Saturday. They said the officers did not put Borrero in any danger.

“When a subject is on his stomach, that is exactly where an officer needs to be positioned, right next to his head near his shoulder. Your knee is supposed to be at the center of his shoulder blades,” said Zucal, who believes that is what a silent, nine-minute surveillance video of the incident showed.

“The leg will be near his head but not on his head. That’s the big difference between this and George Floyd,” Zucal said, recalling the May

25 death in Minneapolis that kicked off nationwide protests when Floyd was pinned beneath the knee of a police officer for nearly nine minutes.

“At no time, according to the expert, and from what I could see, could this man not breathe,” Affa said. “From what I see and what the experts see, it’s so much different than George Floyd. That officer wanted to kill him. He didn’t want to restrain him. What we saw at Sacred Heart and George Floyd is apples to oranges.”

Councilwomen Ce-Ce Gerlach and Cynthia Mota both had concerns about the way police responded to Borrero.

“He was in front of the hospital, so he was looking for help. I don’t think handcuffing him was the right thing to do. I don’t think putting his neck in the middle of the sidewalk was the right thing to do,” Mota said. “How are we able to handle a person in crisis other than putting him in handcuffs?”

Gerlach said she was “deeply concerned” after seeing video of the incident and speaking with Borrero, who joined protesters outside Allentown City Hall during a City Council meeting Wednesday night. “We need to hear audio that corresponds with the visual to see what, if any, de-escalation tactics were used or if there was anything escalating the situation,” Gerlach said. “I’m disturbed by the fact we were told the officers and the gentleman fell to the ground and then it appears something else happened and he was tripped,” she said.

Earlier this week, Gerlach and Siegel proposed a police oversight resolution on a number of reforms, including requiring officers to intervene to stop any excessive use of force, making body camera footage available to the public and removing any exceptions for chokeholds and neck restraints from the use-of-force policy.

Council members polled on Friday said they are open to reviewing the proposal. Zucal, however, said he doesn’t think any council members

should try to “micromanage” the police department. “If we could get an outside group that’s objective, I wouldn’t be opposed to that. However, I won’t let a certain group try to minimize and micromanage the police department.”

Gerlach said she doesn’t necessarily agree with everything protesters want, but supports transferring some money from the police department to address community issues like homelessness and drug addiction.

“I think people have a misconception that this means abolishing the police department. ... I don’t want to get rid of police officers entirely because there is a role for them, but a person who is struggling with alcohol and drug abuse doesn’t need a guy with a gun,” Gerlach said.