A Modest Proposal: regarding Council oversight of hot-button City committees

The Bethlehem Gadfly Gadfly's posts, Modest proposals, Serious Issues April 29, 2019

(6th in a series of modest proposals)

So Gadfly went to the Bethlehem Parking Authority meeting last Wednesday April 24. Perhaps more on the substance of that meeting later.

The meeting was at 4PM. Gadfly recently reported that at a Planning Commission meeting both Diane Szabo Backus and Paige Van Wirt made what we might call "vigorous proposals" [ha! not modest!] for later meeting times to accommodate the large number of citizens who work at that hour and are unable to attend such meetings. And Gadfly was later able to report that the Mayor heard those vigorous proposals and has pledged to require later times across the board in City committees for 2020.

A solid blow for citizen participation. Another shout-out to Backus-Van Wirt-Donchez.

There are many City Authorities, Boards, and Commissions. Take a look. Made up almost entirely of resident volunteers. Gadfly doesn't know exactly, but he guesses the volunteers probably number in the vicinity of 125. A small army.

That's a lot of people the Mayor has to round up. I mean, I'm not sure that people are thronging the Mayor during "Open Door" days and clamoring for such positions. He no doubt has to recruit. Though I hope we never see the day when he has to set up a card table in a mall and hawk for warm bodies.

Gadfly goes to a lot of these meetings. And can say without hesitation that there are a lot of wonderful people doing wonderful work. Good for the Mayor, good for the great people volunteering.

The Mayor nominates resident members, Council approves. Most of the time the approvals are *pro forma*. But there was one significant denial

recently, probably for conflict of interest, a person serving on two closely related bodies.

Approvals should not be *pro forma*, especially for certain committees, and the Parking Authority is one such group. The Parking Authority was a center of controversy in the latter half of 2018 as 70+ posts in the Gadfly parking thread will attest (see the link on the sidebar).

Gadfly could not tell and had suspicions about the range and quality of Board member involvement. The New St. Garage, the Polk Garage, the Desman Parking Study, the conflict with Council, etc., etc. — strangely to Gadfly, it's almost impossible to tell from the Board minutes that these things were going on much less that there were "hot" public "issues" about them. The Authority then had a powerful, involved solicitor and a long-standing Chair — Gadfly wondered if there was any debate or discussion at all, wondered what the role, if any, of the appointed members was.

For we must depend on the Board members to be our "voice" in Authority decisions. Gadfly would like to make sure that they are. Reviewing minutes, Gadfly saw no evidence of conflict, dissent, alternative opinion; Gadfly is not sure that he saw a motion that truly originated with a Board member or new business that originated with a Board member. And if it were not for routine responses to "asks" by the chair for a motion and a second, you might not even know who is on the Board. Attendance at a few meetings suggested that the Authority authority resided in the Executive Director, the solicitor, and the Board chair.

Which is not to say that hot issues weren't ever aired and that all Board members were not heavily involved. But the minutes — basically the only official public record of what transpired — don't reveal much in that respect.

When those Board members come up for re-appointment, on what basis will Council make its oversight decision? Evidence of the quantity and quality of their participation and contributions in deliberations about non-trivial and non-routine matters — as attested to in the minutes — should be a prime body of evidence.

At the April 24 meeting, Gadfly suggested to the Parking Authority Board that the minutes be improved to at least capture the flavor of all viewpoints in discussion, that votes that are not unanimous clearly indicate who the yays and nays are, and he suggested to the members that they be sure not only that they contribute but that their contributions are detailed in the minutes. If they want to be re-appointed, that is.

You can hear Gadfly talk about this as an aspect of his "passion for public participation in city matters" (soooo pompous is your Gadfly!) here:
AUDIO RECORDINGS UNAVAILABLE IN THIS ARCHIVE
My modest proposal is that Council let the Mayor know that proposals for re-appointment of members of "hot" committees, commissions, and boards should include — in addition to resumes*** — specific and substantive evidence of the quality and quantity of member contributions as attested in the minutes.

At the last City Council meeting Backus made the interesting point that since such Board members are appointed by elected officials, they too are in a sense elected. And the public needs accountability, especially on the "hot" committees, and will call for it from Council when re-appointment time comes around.

*** *Instructive here is the good dialogue about oversight initiated by Councilwoman Van Wirt and joined by Council President Waldron and Business Manager Evans sitting in for the Mayor at the January 15 Council meeting and recorded in the minutes on pp 11-12. But for re-appointments, Gadfly is suggesting more than resumes and contact info. There should be evidence of performance.*