

Gadfly mayoral forum #6: The George Floyd anniversary

[The Bethlehem Gadfly](#) [Candidates for election](#), [Election](#), [Forum](#), [Gadfly Forum](#), [George Floyd killing](#) April 20, 2021

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

The Mayoral candidate comparison chart

(Note: these essays were done and posted before the Chauvin verdict.)

The prompts don't get any easier as the finish line approaches.

The prompt:

The Chauvin jury has just started to deliberate as I write this. We look for an “end” soon. Maybe even before all the candidate responses get published.

We look for an end, but whatever the outcome, there will not be “closure.”

Floyd's death is of too great significance for that. The waves will ripple out for years.

Gadfly gave the candidates, mayoral and council candidates alike, a scenario.

George Floyd died May 25, 2020. The one-year anniversary is approaching. An anniversary that will be marked around the country. One can imagine it a day of speeches and ceremonies.

My basic prompt question was should there be an anniversary response at the City Council meeting of May 19 or June 2?

If so, what; if not, why not?

The Floyd death triggered a national reckoning with race and a reimagining of the way we do public safety.

The Floyd death challenged us to be anti-racist.

What have we done? Have we done enough?

The mayor and Police Chief made speeches on the heels of the Floyd murder. A City Council meeting overflowed with heated resident commentators brimming with ideas. A sensitive political climate caused the Police Chief to bite the dust. We resolved to initiate community engagement. We partnered with the NAACP on a Community Advisory Board. We piloted a program with the Health Bureau. We reorganized the police department.

How has what we have done gone? Have we done enough? Do we plan to do more?

Should we pause and take stock of our response to Floyd's death or not?

Do we owe residents some sense of how we have used that year in which we have all been challenged to work seriously on some of the most deeply rooted problems in our society?

Have we done enough?

Or will we simply let the anniversary slide by in silence?

Big open field again for the candidates to play in.

But looking for big ideas.

If you want to listen to my full prompt, click [here](#).

J. William Reynolds

Gadfly,

The most appropriate way to start this prompt isn't by laying out what should be done to acknowledge the one-year anniversary of the

murder of George Floyd. It is rather to lay out what should be done period.

The collective national response to the George Floyd murder reflected a truth that many have known, lived, and talked about for a long, long time. Our experience in this country is fundamentally influenced by our race. Black Lives Matter. The words that so many are afraid to say. Black Lives Matter is partly about the idea that one's experience in this country is based on their race. This is not an opinion statement. It is sad, tragic, and unacceptable, however, that many in our community won't say those words or don't believe your experience in America is influenced by race. In fact, many people have zero interest in having any conversations about anything involving race. Conversations, however, need to be had and systemic action needs to be taken.



Part of the American and local response to the George Floyd murder was influenced and motivated by the systemic racism that our country has been experiencing for hundreds of years. We talked last week about the idea of “two cities,” and it is a reality that has historically played out throughout America. Your economic and educational opportunities are often dictated by your zip code. Access to jobs, transportation, health care, and well-funded public schools are just a few areas where historically the government has failed to create equitable systems. In fact, policy has intentionally been designed throughout American history to direct resources and opportunity to white Americans at the expense of black and brown citizens. Similar to even saying the words “Black Lives Matters,” many people do not believe that systemic racism is a real thing. It is therefore vital that we point out systemic racism where it exists, eliminate it, and build more equitable systems for our future.

Following the national and local conversations last year, Councilwoman Crampsie Smith and I created the Community Engagement Initiative. It was built on the idea that local action should grow out of conversations, experiences, and historically underrepresented perspectives. We know mental health, homelessness, issues of structural poverty, and even areas like equitable school funding play a direct and indirect role in many

citizen encounters with our police department. As we have seen tragedies play out across the country, we wanted to bring citizens, police officers, social service providers, non-profits, and advocates for our homeless population together. One of the goals was to better understand the intersection of the aforementioned issues and start to collectively discuss how we could design more effective systems to tackle these community-wide problems.

There have been some great community conversations led by the Bethlehem Area Public Library, the YWCA, the Hispanic Center, the Bethlehem Area School District, and many others. I know I, and many Councilmembers, have participated and listened to our residents share their feelings on race in America and in our community during these conversations. The City, however, needs to take much more of a leadership role in this area. We should have an employee dedicated to organizing and leading our Community Engagement Initiative. Chief Kott has made progress in increasing the number of officers who are part of these events, but we need to expand that involvement to include every officer. Our officers need to hear from the community about the depth of the structural issues that lead to police involvement. Our community also needs to hear from our officers about the difficult decisions that they must make on a regular basis when responding to calls. As I have mentioned before, the analogy of counting to ten is apt. Someone calls the cops at 10 because 1-9 (equitable school funding, mental health services, economic opportunities) have all failed. By bringing the people together who are involved, the organizations dedicated to 1-10, we are able to collectively work to cut down on how often our community ever gets to 10.

The Bethlehem Area School District has been a leader in the area of anti-racism. Curriculum changes, investments in employee training, and restorative justice have all been priorities for the district. It is also almost impossible to attend a district event without hearing their latest in developing an anti-racist school district. As we approach the one-year anniversary of the George Floyd murder, the City of Bethlehem and the next Mayor needs to take a similar approach (and a much stronger one than City Hall has in the past year).

- Invest in our Community Engagement Initiative with a fulltime employee
- Study the intersection and improve the relationship between our social service providers and our police department
- Create accountability metrics for measuring progress
- Be clear – we aren't just going to be against racism, we are going to be an anti-racist city.

Many of us go through our days believing that our life experience is similar to everyone else. Over the years, between my years as a student in the Bethlehem Area School District, working for State Rep. Steve Samuelson, and my time on City Council, I have learned that my experience is just that – only my experience. My students at William Allen High School have taught me more about this subject than I could ever teach them



about government or history. I trust our educational, healthcare, and justice systems, the process of democracy, and most of all, the institutions that make up our community. Many of them do not. Over the years, I have heard story after story after story about how institutions have let them down, left them behind, or simply weren't designed for their families. That collective frustration and anger came to the forefront of America when the murder of George Floyd occurred. Make no mistake, however, it had been building for a long, long time.

We didn't create the systemic racism that exists in America. It is our responsibility, however, to eliminate it. Every day that we don't take stronger action makes us more responsible for the systemic issues that are part of our community. That comment will make a lot of people uncomfortable. Good. That is where change comes from.

Dana Grubb

2020 was a year unlike any other, with the COVID pandemic, systemic American racism spotlighted, a national election fraught with

dissension, and an insurrection against our Congress and the Capitol Building in Washington. The murder of George Floyd stood out, however, as an example of the many issues, decisions and dilemmas facing members of the black and brown communities and members of law enforcement. The trial of Derek Chauvin for killing Mr. Floyd exacerbated the pain and suffering that murder brought and proved how widespread the vicious tentacles of systemic racism really are in a country that is supposed to be the “land of the free.” Even as that trial was going on, other killings were taking place across the country: a map issued by the Gun Violence Archive places a red marker at the site of every shooting death in the US. The map is awash in red.

The national discourse brought to a head by Mr. Floyd’s murder has raised feelings of loss, resentment, and anger, as well as demands for change. Peaceful public protests and marches following Mr. Floyd’s murder began a healing process, but anger is still evident across the nation and in our city in the discourse on both sides of the community and policing relationship. The term “defund the police” was coined in reaction to a series of police and minority interactions over time, and it is a term that is frightening to many.

In reaction to Bethlehem public officials’ statements on the matter, labels like “Marxist” were mentioned. The use of words like “defund” and “Marxist” are counterproductive and only add to the distrust, unrest, and misunderstanding. They are words of fear and reaction, not words of acceptance and reason. Bethlehem’s community leaders searched for ways to address the growing pressures of this national issue. The Mayor formed a community advisory board, and Council advanced a community engagement initiative. So far, although well intentioned, neither body has provided city residents with any concrete results or plans.

The Bethlehem Police Department transitioned to a new Chief recently, and people expressed hope that this would lead to better relationships between the community served and law enforcement, and thus more effective policing. Positive steps have been taken: the department has been reorganized, and a commitment has been made to training officers on implicit bias, through a Northampton County program.

Immediately after the murder of Mr. Floyd, I had the privilege of interviewing a long time Black friend for a newspaper column I was writing. He told me that he didn't have any issues directly with Bethlehem's Police Department but that he did feel that the current day force did not really know the community that it serves, unlike Bethlehem's officers did in the past. A close friend who died many years ago was a popular Black community police officer in Allentown. Lately, I've thought about him a lot, because although I always sensed that he felt very accepted by the community he policed, I also felt that at times he was unsure just how deep that acceptance really went. I wish I could speak with him now in light of the current events.

In conversations with some of my neighbors who are Black or Brown, they stressed the need for acceptance and respect among all people. That cuts to the core of racism: if all people are not accepted and respected as being on an equal footing, prejudice is the result. And prejudice of all types stems from a fear of those who appear to be different from ourselves.

I've also listened to many white people tell me that they're not racist or discriminatory; yet in some of their qualifying comments it's apparent that they do struggle with these issues. It may more properly be said that they do not wish to be racist or discriminatory but that prejudice is so ingrained, it is extremely difficult to surmount.

I recognize each day that I, personally, must work to better accept others, no matter their background. So, what do I think we should be doing roughly one year after George Floyd's murder?

I'd start with a call to every individual for a personal commitment to working for racial justice by actively opposing racism. It is not enough to consider oneself unprejudiced or say one is against racism: action must be taken directly to combat the issue. The fear of those who seem different and the concurrent emphasis on protecting oneself and others "like us" must be overcome, and systems that sideline, subvert, and dismiss those whom we have deemed different must be destroyed.

Dialogue with others is an important step, as it allows people to comprehend others' perspectives. If we really listen when people of color speak, we can perhaps begin to understand.

“Just walk a mile in their moccasins
Before you abuse, criticize and accuse.
If just for one hour, you could find a way
To see through their eyes, instead of your own.”

–Mary T. Lathrap, 1895*

I’d have no problem if elected officials chose to pass a resolution remembering Mr Floyd’s murder, recognizing failings in our governmental and societal systems, and offering concrete solutions for addressing these issues. But public officials should also commit to a zero-tolerance policy for discriminatory, racist, and bullying behavior in our local government, and have the courage to enforce that policy. I have committed to this throughout my campaign for Mayor.

Change won’t come overnight; however, it can happen if everyone recognizes and accepts the need for change, overcomes their fear of that change, and commits to active engagement to fight against the prejudices and stigmas that only serve, ultimately, to hold us all back.

**Edited; complete text online.*

Residents are welcome to fashion reflections on candidate comments, sending them to 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