

# President Waldron responds: “There’s been calls for me to gavel down other members of Council when they are speaking”

[The Bethlehem Gadfly](#) [City government](#) January 20, 2020

 Latest in a series of posts on City Government 

*President Waldron has been admirably on the record and transparent in his response to criticism of his gavel-style, and it is important that we hear his own words.*

**January 2, 2019**

I also want to make a couple general remarks which I’m sure some other members of council will want to jump in on once we get to new business about some of the accusations of some of the rules of Robert’s Rules, and my opinion on that. I spoke to Mr. Spirk about it, and I went back and did some research on some of the minutes and some of the things that were said by members of council and by members of the public, and I just don’t see a lot there as far as violation of Robert’s Rules. Personal attacks, I think, is a term getting thrown around for political reasons. I think there’s a healthy debate, and I think there’s respect for each another on Council. We may not agree with each other, and that’s fine, and that comes down to the vote some times, and I like to think that we can move forward professionally. But I think there is a decorum here, and I don’t think that there has been a lack of professionalism. There’s been calls for me to gavel down other members of Council when they are speaking, and I don’t see myself doing that in 2019. I think that the First Amendment is strong and well in this room, and I have great respect for it to the point that I respect it over Robert’s Rules. I think that people should have the ability to speak their mind as long as they are doing it in a respectful way, and I think that disagreement is good because it shows different points of view and perspectives. Again, you may not agree with that assessment, and you might think that we should follow Robert’s Rules to the “T,” but my view is that we should be able to have a positive conversation in which we respectfully disagree with each other. That is not prone to personal attacks just because we use each other’s names. That doesn’t mean that it is a personal attack. It’s just a differing of

opinion. . . . I give great respect to Robert's Rules, but I think the First Amendment, as Mr. Spirk would agree, in court rulings is that the First Amendment will trump Robert's Rules any day of the week. So if you want to point to Robert's Rules and say these are the rules we are supposed to be following, I do respect those, however, I think that a healthy dialog starts with the ability to express yourself, and if you don't like what someone else is saying, I don't think censoring their speech is the right thing. I think topping it with better speech, more accurate, or a different point of view is a fine thing to do, just like Mr. Antalics and I did this evening. And we can respectfully disagree on a different point of view, but that's part of the process, I think.

### **September 3, 2019**

I'm gonna try to enforce the rules moving forward fairly and consistently. That becomes challenging when rules are habitually broken, and I'm trying to give guidance and my guidance is pushed aside. I think everyone has a right to be heard, and I think they have a right to speak, from members of the public to members of Council. I've been criticized for having a light gavel in the past, and I can promise you I will continue to have a light gavel. I don't think silencing people's thoughts and opinions is a productive way to continue a conversation. With that being said, I do think there should be a level of decorum and respect for each other in the room. And I think at times at the last Council meeting that was not there. I did not get any feedback publicly that that was a positive conversation. In fact, many people reached out to me that I saw and said that it was cringe-worthy and it was embarrassing. I think the tone of that conversation wasn't helpful, and it's my opinion that I think we can do better and we must do better when we get in to the dangerous territory of accusing people of things on Council, whether that's members of Council accusing each other of something or members of the public accusing, because that happens quite a lot, and I don't gavel that down much the same way people go over the 5-minute time limit and I don't gavel that down. I think people should be heard. Whether you agree with that opinion or not, the First Amendment is wide-ranging and it supersedes Roberts' Rules of Order. But I would hope that we would have the respect for each other to adhere to those, so that the conversation can be productive. I hear a lot different kind of tone than I did last week, Mr. Callahan, and I appreciate that you were reflective on

that, and I think open debate is a good thing. I think we should hold each other accountable for our thoughts and actions as well, and I think moving forward taking a little time to consider how our words are affecting other people in the room, it's going to be beneficial. So I look forward to continuing this conversation publicly. Whether it's warranted that people think the rules are being violated — Roberts' Rules — which I think they are — I'm going to enforce them pretty liberally because I think the conversation should be open and fair, and I'm going to take remarks from members of Council if they want to give a little course correction and think that I should enforce the rules a little differently. I'll listen to the majority of Council if they have a strong opinion that the rules should be enforced differently. Although I'm currently president of Council, I would welcome feedback from members of Council if they think I should have a different approach. And I'll try to balance those in the future as we continue these conversations under new business.

### **January 6, 2020**

I did reach out to members of Council, and I did speak to everyone about their views. . . . During my conversations with everybody on Council, I didn't receive any negative feedback about my style or my management of running the meetings, which I took to heart, and I took that advice to mean that I was doing a fine job running the meetings, and I think if I were to continue as president of Council I would have a very similar approach to the way I ran the meetings in the last two years. I will stand by my record of service in the way I have run meetings. I have been criticized a bit for allowing people to speak too much. But that's a criticism I will take. Whether that's members of council or members of the public. I do have what is called a soft gavel, and I think in my opportunity to limit speech I have chosen repeatedly not to do that. I don't think limiting ideas that you are not in agreement with or unpopular is not the way to a healthy dialog. I think that you combat unpopular ideas with better ideas, and that has been my approach to running and facilitating these meetings, and I would bring that to the table if I was elected to serve a second term. . . . More conversation is always a good thing, whether you agree with those ideas or not, I think knowing what someone else thinks and having the ability to understand and allowing them to articulate is a positive thing whether you like those ideas or you think they are terrible. I think everybody should have an

opportunity to be heard. I have asked members of Council publicly and privately whether they did have any feedback for me in the management of the meetings, and I have received a little bit of feedback but nothing to the point where anybody felt that I should take a different approach to the way that I manage and I try to keep order in the room. It is an imperfect science. It is an imperfect science, and it is a difficult balancing act from moment to moment, but I am willing to continue those conversations with members of Council if I am elected to serve as president to see how we can allow for an even more productive dialog that would make people feel as included as possible, open up City Hall to as many residents as we can get here, and to hear their input as well.

*to be continued . . .*

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