

# Gadfly gets garrulous on Garrison

The Bethlehem Gadfly 11 and 15 West Garrison St., [Neighborhoods](#), Northside October 12, 2019

 (13th in a series of posts about 11 and 15 W. Garrison St.) 

Herewith and hereunder the Gadfly reflects on the Garrison case, which provides much food for thought.

- Whether public testimony matters is always a question. Gadfly knows some followers think it is like pee-ing in the wind. Ye of little faith. The neighborhood turn-out here made a difference. Not just numbers but the quality of the testimony. High-quality testimony. These were clearly good people. Undeniable to all Council members. Mixture of reason and emotion. Effective specific examples of neighborhood culture. Neighborhood past “history” was meaningful context. They communicated a sense of community specialness — “something’s happening here,” like the song says. Council was listening; that’s not always the case with City bodies and agencies. And here Gadfly is just wondering outloud — he wonders if public testimony is more likely to have effect before Council (elected officials) than, say, the Planning or Zoning Boards (appointed members).
- Interestingly, the “yes” votes here (BC, MC, AW) each highlighted the good character of the petitioner. The way he presented himself weighed heavily in the rationales for their decisions. They were clear and vocal about that. Character, not quality of work, for there is no history of the latter by the petitioner on which to judge. But the words and demeanor of the petitioner generated trust that he was collaborative, had a good heart, believed in community, would keep his promises. Frankly, Gadfly has not been a subscriber to the “Trust the Developer” attitude — more “Trust but verify.” But he had to admit that the petitioner’s approach here seemed natural, genuine, not a put-on. So, on the surface anyway, this was not

obviously a classic good guy v. bad guy confrontation. Gadfly is not surprised that several councilmembers responded favorably.

- Beyond the character rationale, the “yes” argument that an influx of apartment dwellers would happily give Garrison residents more people to grow their positive neighborhood culture with did not seem forceful at all (AW). In fact it seems very strained. Their contiguity (good SAT word) would not at all be the same as house to house. The argument that if you like something, you’ll like more of it is not logical. Proper scale is crucial to forming bonds. One doesn’t readily think of apartment complexes as communities/neighborhoods. People who are the cause of parking woes, increased traffic, danger to kids, and so forth are not likely to be seen as neighbor material even for the sake of argument.
- While most of the “no” votes might have agreed with the “yeses” about the good character of the developer, however, they did not feel that he made the case that he absolutely needed that 18% of the space rezoned to do the project. It was not clear that denying the rezoning for the sake of safeguarding a neighborhood would scuttle or restrict the project. So the “no’s” had “hard” reasons for denial as well as the fact that there was no sense of acute hardship for the petitioner. The “no” votes were not acting totally on sentiment. The petitioner failed to make a definitive need for those two parcels, rather than he simply planned the new building rendering with them gone from the get-go. Needing more emphasis were questions like: what would not be possible, what would have to change if the rezoning was denied?
- BC and JWR — especially BC — provided the tonic of realism. Neighbors, you gotta realize that the petitioner is in the driver’s seat here: you may “win” this rezoning but still get a project that you won’t like. Thus, if you win, you may lose. BC recognized that he was swimming against the strong emotional tide in the

room, but he bravely kept breasting the waves (how did Gadfly get stuck in this metaphor?). He kept listing unpleasant but possible scenarios in the face of audience groans. For the purpose of asking the residents to have full knowledge of the consequences of their actions. But for what reason was BC doing this? Compromise. Interesting.

- Compromise. Here for Gadfly is the most striking and surprising aspect of the deliberation discussion. Each of the “yes” voters envisioned compromise, “a plan that all of you would like,” a plan that BC even volunteered to broker. That’s a first for Gadfly. Maybe old timers will know of other such examples of direct negotiation brokered by Council that they can share with us. Gadfly wishes that the petition was not withdrawn for the simple curiosity of seeing how such a process might play out. If there was unselfish good will on both sides — we are not the Middle East, after all — could an equitable and agreeable settlement be worked out? That would be a happy outcome. Gadfly had not seen Council or a Council member take the active step of being a go-between before.
- Another nice surprise: the main basis for newcomer GCS’s “no.” Her refreshing and almost revolutionary stance favoring a cluster of old homes over a cluster of new apartments was rooted both in a sense of history/a sense of Bethlehem culture, ratified by the beliefs of her constituents — and contrary to City policy. It was an example of fresh, independent thought. Nobody else put this rather small rather insignificant specific decision into such a large meaningful framework. She had some reservations about aspects of the new apartments, but a time-honored Bethlehem ideal of home ownership trumped everything. Garrison St. was “us.” Gadfly liked that thinking.
- JWR, though he voted “no,” articulated what should have been the “yeses” lead argument: the businesses want more people on Broad Street. Gadfly perked up at that. But JWR did not seem especially greedy for large numbers like the 70-some

apartments the petitioner planned. JWR recognized that whatever decision was made in the instant case would put more feet on the street. That seemed to satisfy him and made the two Garrison St. parcels not so crucial to the important goal of the City/business community.

- JWR has a delightful nerdy streak. He teased giving us a history of zoning. Gadfly was hungry for it. But he teased also that some (many?) of the arguments advanced against the rezoning on Garrison were not appropriate at a Zoning hearing like this — implying, I guess, that they were more applicable to some other occasion, perhaps like a Planning Commission hearing. JWR exposed Gadfly's great ignorance. He has recognized that ignorance and modestly proposed that the City enlighten us all about the approval processes in the development area by providing a kind of tutorial — that is, following a generic proposal from inception through the train of hoops and approvals necessary before construction begins. That would be awesome. In the meantime, Gadfly wishes he knew what exactly was on JWR's mind making that statement. A lot of balls were thrown into the air in testimony. JWR, just perhaps for fellow nerds like me, what in your view should have been the narrow foci relating to this rather circumscribed petition? For instance, was safety of kids extraneous testimony in your opinion? Or parking? Gadfly swears, the process is a bit mystical to him. Gadfly feels he needs a better understanding of the process in order to recognize the “sweet spots” at which to aim arguments at each step along the way.

Now this list of reflections has grown legs and is already too long. So Gadfly will save his climactic thoughts — where all of this has been heading — till next time. The better to focus.

**Festival UnBound**

**Ten days of original theatre, dance, music, art and  
conversation designed to celebrate and imagine our future  
together!**

**October 4-13**