

Gadfly all-abuzz

The Bethlehem Gadfly Community Engagement Initiative October 12, 2020

 *Latest in a series of posts about the Community Engagement Initiative* 

Community Engagement Initiative rev July 7

ref: **Advancing the Community Engagement Initiative, Police on board**

On July 7, City Council passed a resolution “urging the creation of a Community Engagement Initiative in the City of Bethlehem.” You can find the (revised from the original) resolution that passed 7-0 at the link above. You might want to refresh yourself on its contents.

The resolution urges “the Mayor and his Administration” to create the Community Engagement Initiative.

Gadfly was thrilled.

“Good conversation builds community,” sayeth the Gadfly.

Quoth the Gadfly: “The main goal of the Gadfly blog is to provide a space for healthy public dialogue about issues of concern to Bethlehem, Pa., residents. All sides, all perspectives welcome.”

The CEI is the Gadfly blog intentionality writ large.

Gadfly was thrilled July 7.

At the City Council meeting last week October 6, Councilman Reynolds advanced some more information about the Community Engagement Initiative that was approved by Council July 7.

Do you have 5 minutes to listen?

Audio Player not available in this archive

According to Councilman Reynolds, the CEI can be composed of two types of meetings:

- traditional City-run meetings through Council committees etc. such as the scheduled **October 29** Committee of the Whole meeting
- meetings by various community organizations such as at the **Hispanic Center** October 27 “Racial Justice for Stronger Community” event

Gadfly has to be frank. He’s not feeling good about the way the CEI is unfolding. And he will simply shotgun almost at random some of his concerns here.

- The energizing power of the CEI according to the approved resolution (see the link above) is the Mayor.
- Where is the Mayor in all of this? The voice at the top of the command structure is missing. Especially now that things are beginning to roll.
- JWR talked about the CEI October 6. The new Police Chief talked about the CEI October 6. The Mayor did not.
- The Mayor did say at an earlier meeting (August 11?) that he was listening for good ideas. But Gadfly thinks he needs to do more than that.
- The CEI isn’t going to work if the Mayor is passive. The CEI needs Mayoral force.
- The Mayor could help stimulate community meetings.
- The Police Chief takes orders from the Mayor.
- The Mayor could pledge his department heads to attend Community meetings.
- If the Mayor isn’t kicking some butt or persuasively making a case, why will the city staff engage?
- JWR says he talked with the Mayor about publicizing the CEI events. I should hope the Mayor would do that. I would hope there was no question he would do that. But that doesn’t seem enough. Is this the extent of the Mayor’s role?

- Gadfly doesn't know what the lead time was, maybe it was prohibitive, but there is nothing about the CEI in the current **City newsletter**, nothing in the Mayor's statement therein.
- Top down is crucial. To Gadfly, so far the Mayor is a missing link. And he doesn't understand it.
- Gadfly thinks the Mayor should be leading as envisioned in the resolution.
- So why is JWR the driving force? The Council voted 7-0 to approve the CEI, but is everybody engaged? JWR's voice seemed a bit supplicating to his Council colleagues October 6. If this is Council's baby now, Gadfly would hope for continual visible, vocal support from all other members. At an earlier meeting a couple Council members gave some support though qualifying that they couldn't promise to make all meetings. JWR was pretty much a lone wolf October 6.

- But maybe there is something here Gadfly doesn't see. Gadflies are outsiders. They can only see what they can see. And thus often say dumb things.
- Maybe that first type meeting JWR described, the October 29 Committee of the Whole meeting, was called by the Mayor. Nothing has been said publicly in any detail about it so far, as far as Gadfly knows.
- All we know about this meeting so far is "Interaction of the Police Department/Health Bureau/Recreation/Department of Community and Economic Development."
- Of course, we might be informed about the meeting at the October 20 Council meeting, but it seems a bit odd to Gadfly to announce it a full 6 weeks ahead and not describe its content or purpose.
- And it is a meeting called by Council not the Mayor, and it is a Committee of the Whole meeting not an open meeting for the public, so it doesn't, on the surface, look like a meeting called by the Mayor.
- And it's not clear yet how, if we are to see it as part of the CEI, the community will be engaged.

- What is our engagement at this meeting to qualify it as something different than what we've had before and a legitimate part of the CEI??
- Will the community contribute ideas beforehand, which would seem to be the idea of a CEI, or just make comments after the Council discussion, as the more usual practice?
- We hope to find out October 20.

- How is the community at large being apprised of this initiative? How is enthusiasm and expectation being whipped up that we're serious this time that engagement on their part is going to make a difference? How are we selling the idea that the deadly notion that "City Hall never listens" doesn't apply any more?
- Are organizations being stimulated, energized to have meetings? Are we suggesting the kinds of topics we would like them to address? Or are we being passive? Are Council members just keeping their ears to the ground and reporting what they hear? Or are they prompting, promoting?
- A prime concern is hearing from the people we don't usually hear from. Giving the unheard a voice at the table is the kind of rhetoric we've had in descriptions of the CEI. How is that goal progressing? That seems so important, so very important. That group is likely to be unorganized. How are they even hearing that we want to hear them?
- There was no mention of the promising meeting with the Prof Ochs/CORE group that was thought of so highly that it was amended into the final resolution and with which a meeting was envisioned for this month or next. What's up there?
- Gadfly would have liked to hear that the list of monthly events would be published for the public to see on such-and-such a date each month, and therefore Council members — who are the only suppliers of content — have a such-and-such deadline each month. Let's be definite. Let's sound organized. "The public can expect the first list of events on _____ and on the _____th of the month every month thereafter."

- Gadfly understands the need, desire, value of getting people to talk. For giving voice to the voiceless. He believes in good conversation.
- But he also looks forward to something done, and he worries about diffuseness and time passing.
- The CEI can provide a continuing space for conversation and dialogue over time, which is good, but when does action factor in?
- How, when, will ideas that bubble up arc back to policy makers? The CEI provides a space for talk. There hasn't yet been any talk of talk arcing to action.
- The process as described so far seems too open-ended to Gadfly. The goal of all this is to do something. There was strong talk, rousing talk of making change. Where's that part of the process?
- Could reports from those meetings, meetings that Council members attended, be made publicly at Council, so there would be sharing, so everybody can hear what's going on?
- Could the community organizations be strongly invited to attend Council, report on their discussions/conversations, advance position statements, draft legislation?

- The new Police Chief was all agreeable. But Gadfly would like to hear much, much more about how the police will be engaged before he in any way believes there will be the kind of cooperation and participation that will be meaningful. Call him a Grinch.
- Gadfly has read over and over that officer buy-in is crucial but hard. A lot aren't going to think they need community engagement. Gadfly expects some active resistance. He needs to be shown otherwise.
- Gadfly is skeptical of easy general voluntary cooperation and participation, and he doesn't believe the Chief can legislate it.
- The Chief should have been asked to report back on her plan to involve a number of police sizeable enough to make a culture difference.

- Gadfly can't believe a high number of officers are voluntarily interested and over a long run in doing this to such a marked degree that it will make a difference.
- JWR talked of the difference to him when he engaged with the community of his students. But he made it sound like he wasn't expecting that a lot of officers need engage. But the ones who don't engage won't get a chance to feel the difference he did. And if enough don't engage, what have we gained?
- There are 154 police officers (now maybe 153). What's the goal number for involvement?
- JWR said the key component to the success of the CEI was the "real involvement" of the police department. There is no plan for this crucial component yet and no request for one.
- You probably need either a quantitatively lot of general officer engagement or a good number of key officer engagement to make a difference in department culture. Gadfly can't see this as easy as the Chief made it sound.
- So the Chief's words were polyannish to Gadfly.
- What's the Union going to say? Some departments Gadfly has read about build community engagement into the work day and have other kinds of incentives. Won't we need such mechanisms, such carrots?
- Gadfly senses a lot of work to be done here.
- The Chief should be made to show a plan. Welcome to Chiefdom!

Ok, ok, Gadfly the Grinch. Gadfly the wet blanket. Enough. Just being honest. He doesn't feel good about this CEI as its evolving so far.

And he's ready for his slap upside the head. Maybe on both sides. And on top.

He buzzes because he cares. He sees a "momentous" opportunity here — to quote a follower — and is worried that it will slip away.

What Gadfly expected was something like the organization for the Climate Action Plan. Something like the organization for Northside 2027. We see something getting done there. Progress. Something like the series of “Summits” one of the Gadfly followers suggested that a Bethlehem-based organization ran in Detroit and which we reported on in these pages. Something more organized by this time, 4 1/2 months after the murder of George Floyd.

Gadfly is fond of quoting Kurt Vonnegut: “There is no reason good can’t triumph over evil. It is simply a matter of organization.”

He doesn’t feel that organization here yet.

And time is passing.

to be continued . . .