

People who speak at public meetings should be honored

The Bethlehem Gadfly City government, Gadfly's posts April 22, 2019

(The latest in a series of posts on City government)

The Gadfly project is all about public participation.

And recently he witnessed some effective championing of public participation at the highest levels of city government.

Leading off the criticism of the Martin Tower design at the Planning Commission meeting April 11, Diane Szabo Backus called attention to the poor time of the meeting – 4pm – for working people. Toward the end of public comment, one such late-arriving working person Paige Van Wirt – Councilwoman in her night job – forcefully ratified Diane's frustration at this obstacle to public participation, calling for meetings to start later. You can find recordings of both Diane's and CW Van Wirt's commonsense remarks [here](#).

PVW didn't let go of the issue of such poorly timed city meetings at City Council on April 16, again forcefully suggesting that meetings be scheduled for the evenings and, going even further, forcefully suggesting that meetings – especially Zoning, Planning, Redevelopment, and Parking – be video'd. To his credit, Mayor Donchez replied that he will be directing that scheduling of meetings in 2020 be at the 6 and 7pm hours and that video-ing will be discussed. Now that the CC meetings are video'd, we can see this forceful statement by PVW and the interchange with the mayor in the recording of the April 16 meeting at min. 1:42:57. Well done Diane, PVW, and His Honor. But there's more.

PVW forcefully as well took on the “excoriating demeanor” of the Planning Commission chair toward the public commenters on April 11. See the above video of the April 16 meeting at min. 1:44:55.

VIDEO UNAVAILABLE ACCORDING TO YOUTUBE

“The people who come down to comment at a public meeting should be honored for the care they give the City. They're not being paid. They don't have ulterior motives. They were there because they cared deeply. I

cannot support this chairman when he comes up for re-nomination because I feel that the citizens were not treated with the respect that they were due.”

Planning Commissioners are nominated by the Mayor and approved by City Council. In her opening remarks at the April 16 CC meeting (I’ll come back to them again in a following post), Diane intriguingly asserted that Commission appointment by elected officials is, in effect, election.

Another reminder in this election season that when we elect City Council members, we are, in effect, electing such people as the Planning Commission chair. Thus, if we the public want improved channels of participation, we must elect Council members who will actively champion it.

PVW concluded her substantial comments at the bottom end of a meeting almost two hours long by that time with “Thank you for your patience, I’m sorry.”

Gadflyers are far from sorry for such powerful support.