

The Issue of Parking Fees and Fines Now before the Mayor and Council: Part 2 (24)

The Bethlehem Gadfly Gadfly's posts, Parking, Serious Issues October 2, 2018

(24th in a series of posts on parking)

Come with Gadfly on the next step.

Here is the BPA case distilled from the Desman report as best I can. Of course, take me to task for things I have missed or misconstrued.

Trying to wrestle that 93-page report into something my mind can grasp on this specific topic.

Has [BPA/Desman made a successful case to the Mayor for the increase in meter parking fees \(and by implication to Council on the fines\)](#)? That's what we want to think about.

The Asker

Gadfly's first question is who or what is this Bethlehem Parking Authority that's making this proposal. Who are these people who come out of nowhere (well, North St.) and ask us for money? Don't lie to Gadfly – you've wondered too. If Gadfly is given another life, he wants to learn more about "Authorities" and their relation to cities, and why they came into existence. I'll bet it's a good story.

The BPA:

- established in 1988 under City Ordinance No. 2196 (the Mayor cited 533.01 of our Codified Ordinances in specific regard to the fees)
- managed and controlled by a Board comprised of five members appointed by the City's Mayor in accordance with the Parking Authority Act
- financed and/or costs recovered primarily through user charges, operations are not subsidized by the City's General Fund
- meets monthly (open to the public) at the Authority's office at 85 W. North Street (I've been there, great facility)
- subject to oversight by the Mayor and Council

- seeks approval of the Mayor for parking meter rates, City Council for fines

Key point: “The financial health of the Bethlehem Parking Authority is not only important in terms of its ability to operate on a day-to-day basis, but also in terms of its ability to maintain its existing assets, upgrade technology as necessary, and support economic development by adding public parking when and where necessary.” (52-53)

Another key point: “the BPA has consistently generated positive Net Cash Flow dating back until at least 2010. Additionally, since 2013, the BPA has transferred \$500,000 a year to the City to support its General Fund, a practice which is expected to be discontinued after 2020.” (52-53)

Bottom line: BPA is sort of separate from the City. Has a big job. Has a lot of responsibility. But can only spend what it makes. And needs approval(s) for raising revenue.

The Ask:

- raise meter fees from \$1/hr to \$1.50/hr
- raise fines commensurately, say from \$10 to \$15 and etc.

The Argument:

- the hourly rate for metered on-street parking has not increased since 2012 (49)
- the industry standard in fines is 10-15 times the hourly rate charged for parking, with 15 times as the target (50)
- analysis of comparable municipalities shows our rates low (52)
- increase rates to more closely align with the rates charged in comparable cities (52)

Bottom line: “Compared to other similar municipalities both in the Commonwealth and in neighboring states, the parking rates and fine amounts for violations in Bethlehem are below market rate.” (can’t find the damn page reference in this 93-page report now — grrrr.)

The Pinch (53-54)

- BPA needs money
- New Street Garage: \$17.7m cost, debt service \$440,000 in 2018-2019, \$830,000 in 2020 and beyond
- repair of the Walnut Street Parking Garage: \$4-4.5m over next several years, higher after that to repair (but maybe replacement at cost of \$20m)
- future capital repair and replacement fund: instead of from operating revenues, \$200,000/yr

The Demand (55) (61-63)

- why the BPA needs money
- at present there’s a sufficient supply of public parking in both the northside and southside downtowns to satisfy the existing demand
- Northside near-term: increased demand if Hotel Bethlehem expansion does not include a garage; temporary demand with replace/repair of the Walnut St. Garage
- Southside East near-term: actual and potential new development plus possible loss of Ruins East and Ruins West lots could cause a 450-space deficit
- Southside West near-term: available public parking capacity should be sufficient to satisfy the net new demand
- long-term: given uncertainty not factoring this in at present

The Conclusions (63-64)

- in the Northside downtown the existing supply of public parking appears adequate to satisfy the future demand for parking
- in the southside downtown, the existing supply of public parking appears adequate to satisfy the future demand for parking on the west side, while there appears to be a significant parking shortfall on the east side.

The Recommendations

- a plan to manage the impending parking shortfall on Southside East could include a new parking structure for the corner of E. 3rd Street and Polk Street or a formalized agreement with the Sands Corporation to ensure that the SteelStacks parking lots will remain available. (69-70)
- increase on-street metered parking rates: will increase turnover of spaces and gain \$250,000/yr
- increase fines for parking violations: our rates only half the average of comparison cities now; raise from \$10 to \$15, etc., would be industry standard and raise \$400,000/yr
- Demolish and reconstruct the Walnut Street Garage, cost of \$20m. (75)

The Payoff:

- better parking management, more turnover, etc.
- \$650,000 increased revenue per year

The Feedback (1)

Apparently from public meetings, interviews, and so forth from the beginning of the study to the first draft report:

- Parking is too expensive; some think that meter rates are too expensive for customers and others think monthly rates are too expensive for employees/business owners. (6)
- There are concerns that the Parking Authority does not consider the impacts that their operational and pricing decisions will have on downtown businesses. (6)

The Feedback (2)

Relevant survey questions (Appendix):

- 15: “Compared to the current Bethlehem parking rates, I am willing to pay more to improve my experience by making parking easier to use, find, and pay for”: strongly disagree and agree = 80%
- 18: “As the owner/manager of a business in Downtown Bethlehem, do you have any concerns, issues regarding parking?” high cost 3rd highest of 8 responses
- 19: “If you are business owner/manager, have your customers voiced concern over the cost or availability of parking?” significant yes response

The Feedback (3)

Relevant questions and comments on this topic from the April 12 meeting on the draft report (not “final” as the heading indicates) (77-78)

- A majority of respondents to the online surveys indicated that the current parking rates are too high – in light of this, why did we recommend raising on-street parking rates?
- There is concern about the Authority’s debt load

Knock! Knock! Are you with me out there? Who remembers Johnny Carson tapping the microphone to see if it was on when he didn't get a laugh. Endearing gesture.

But are you with me?

Chew on this.

And then let's move on to some further analysis to frame the issue for the Mayor and Council.

- Gadfly