

City Council takes up the ethics issue

The Bethlehem Gadfly City government, Ethics December 4, 2019

 *Latest in a series of posts on Ethics and City Government* 

Ok, you didn't go to City Council last night (but some Gadfly followers did — good to see you!) or watch the live-stream.

And you are wondering what happened in regard to the ethics issue.

(Remember that the video of the entire meeting is now available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_wr-dYbySo4: begin at 1:20:50 for the ethics issue.)

As usual, Gadfly suggests that you use the accounts of the meeting by our good beat reporters below (clips provided but check out the full articles) for a handy overview.

Briefly, the main highlight was that Councilman Reynolds engaged Councilman Callahan, the upshot of which was that Council removed BGC from his role as liaison to the Parking Authority, although BGC offered to resign beforehand.

Gadfly will return and take you through the meeting, but use the news articles as your set up.

[Nicole Radzievich, “Callahan resigns parking post ahead of Bethlehem council vote to dismiss him.” Morning Call, December 4, 2019.](#)

Bethlehem City Councilman Bryan Callahan on Tuesday was pushed out of his role as Bethlehem Parking Authority liaison over comments he made last month about a parking project that went to a developer who employs his brother, former Mayor John Callahan.

The councilman lauded the strength of that firm's proposal to undertake the retail development at a future South Side garage and questioned the ethics of one of Mayor Robert Donchez's top aides during the selection process without providing proof for his allegations.

Councilman J. William Reynolds said it was Bryan Callahan who overstepped by interjecting himself into public conversation about the project given his family relationship. Reynolds made a motion to remove Callahan as council's liaison to the Parking Authority. Moments before council voted 5-2 to remove him, Callahan defended his comments and announced he was resigning as liaison, calling the motion moot. "I know your games," Callahan said to Reynolds.

In justifying Callahan's removal as parking liaison, Reynolds pointed to Callahan's public comments of the retail project at the future garage at Polk and Third streets.

Karner said after Tuesday's meeting that she did not call authority members to negotiate on behalf of Nova Development the morning of the vote. She said she spoke with one member more than a week before to ask how much background the authority members knew about the project so she could know how much to include in the committee's written recommendation.

Callahan declined after the meeting to disclose where he had gotten his information, although he described it during the meeting as "first-hand knowledge."

Earlier at Tuesday's council meeting, Callahan took issue with the ad hoc committee's recommendation for Nova Development, calling it "one of the most biased reports I ever read." He said the Peron-Petrucci proposal offered \$190,000 more for the property to develop the retail.

Callahan later called for Van Wirt not to have anything to do with the Parking Authority matters either, because the authority has an easement

on her property for the Walnut Street Garage. Van Wirt said she found it “troubling” that he researched her personal property and said she would seek advice from council’s solicitor about whether that’s a conflict for her.

Sara K. Satullo, “Bethlehem councilman stripped of role over ‘unequivocally inappropriate’ behavior.” lehighvalleylive.com, December 4, 2019.

Bethlehem City Councilman Bryan Callahan, who’s been raising the alarm about potential ethics violations in a city department, found the tables turned Tuesday night when his fellow council members stripped him of his role as liaison to the city parking authority amid concerns about his recent conduct.

The rare action and strong rebuke comes after Callahan spent months clashing with fellow council members and repeatedly accused one of Mayor Bob Donchez’s top aides of unethical behavior similar to the pay-to-play scandals prosecuted in Allentown and Reading.

Councilman J. William Reynolds at Tuesday’s council meeting pressed Callahan to justify his allegations, then painstakingly detailed how he believes his colleague is actually the person acting inappropriately. Reynolds seized on the position of Callahan’s brother, and former Bethlehem mayor, John Callahan as director of business development for Peron Development. The parking authority selected Peron to spearhead the commercial component of a new parking deck on Southside.

“Your brother was a great mayor and there are great projects that they (Peron) are doing in the City of Bethlehem,” Reynolds said. “They don’t look nearly as good when you advocate for them here, privately, publicly, whatever it might be.”

When Reynolds brought forward a motion to remove Bryan Callahan as council's liaison to the Bethlehem Parking Authority, Callahan offered to resign, eventually agreeing to step down from the role. But council still voted 5-2 to strip him of the liaison position, with Callahan and Councilman Michael Colon voting no.

Callahan agreed the issues have gotten confused, emphasizing he sought to handle them privately and individually. He blamed Mayor Bob Donchez for not heeding his concerns and forcing him to take them public. He argues he just wants to know whether there is truth to the complaints he has been fielding about Karner's department.

Other members of council do not share Callahan's concerns about Karner's actions, and the mayor has defended her on several occasions. Karner attended Tuesday night's council meeting, but did not engage Callahan when he addressed her.

It culminated Tuesday night with Reynolds jumping into the fray, pressing Callahan to justify his allegations and detailing what he sees as Callahan's missteps.

Reynolds called into question Callahan's own conduct throughout the process, noting after the ad hoc committee interviews Callahan referenced those negotiations publicly in an Aug. 20 council meeting, where he appeared to be advocating for an aspect of the project. As the council liaison to the parking authority, he should not be talking to board members about their decisions and he should not be cheerleading for aspects of a project, Reynolds said.

The Polk Street parking garage process is in the early stages, and keeping Callahan as liaison is rife with potential conflicts. Reynolds thinks it is a great project that currently stands in the shadow of Callahan's support.

"I do not have confidence that Mr. Callahan should continue as our liaison to the parking authority," Reynolds said. "I feel this has damaged

further the reputation or the connection between city council and the parking authority. I think we just need to look at his own comments from previous meetings and what he said today: 'This is the most biased report I have ever read.' He might feel that. But he's not the one that should be making that particular argument when a member of his family is involved in this" RFP.

Callahan sought to defend himself, arguing he had no input on the parking authority's vote. But he did not fight the removal, offering up his resignation. He argued that no one on council has been harder on the BethWorks development group — Perrucci's investment group that sold off its shares in the Sands Casino to Wind Creek Bethlehem — and the structuring of the casino transfer tax.

Council's liaison appointments are made at the discretion of the council president, so the call for removal was rather unprecedented.

"You know what Mr. Reynolds, I know your games," Callahan said. "I will step down as the parking authority liaison."

At the end of the meeting, he pressed Donchez, who promised a reply within the next day on the status of the investigation.