

What's behind the votes? (70)

The Bethlehem Gadfly Gadfly's posts, Parking, Serious Issues November 10, 2018

(70th in a series of posts on parking)

We know that the vote was 6-1 in favor of indefinitely tabling the BPA proposal, but of as much interest as the final tally should be the reasons supporting the votes.

So here Gadfly gives you text and video windows on the main commentary preceding the vote. CM Callahan was the lone “no” vote, so we should pay special attention to his position as we judge the “ayes.” Gadfly will post an overview reflection on the meeting and the decision in the near future, but in the meantime he invites you to engage with each of the positions and see where your opinion falls. With the video you can almost be there.

Councilman Reynolds

CM Reynolds framed the specific response to and specific questions he asked of the Mayor that Gadfly reported on last time with refreshing comments about what Gadfly would call communication problems. Reynolds pointed out the confusion and frustration some felt was created by lack of transparency and context. He expressed belief that all things could be properly explained but that “we” (the City) need to provide information in a clearer fashion. On the “large scale decisions,” it’s the administration’s job, not BPA’s, to “stand up” and articulate goals and rationale. Gadfly found those welcome sentiments and believes what the Mayor presented was aligned with those sentiments – a step toward better communication.

Councilman Callahan

CM Callahan was the lone “no” vote and he makes some good points. The video link is to Callahan’s initial and main comments, but Gadfly has added in points he made during two other comments.

- The disparity between the meter rates and the fines will cause diminished parking turnover and more expenses for the BPA and will create a serious issue for the BPA that will inevitably become an issue for Council.
- If Council action to deny the BPA proposal is for “leverage” against the BPA, that is a political act and not for the good of the City.

- By the “rules” (everybody agrees the “trifecta” rules over responsibility for different parts of the parking system don’t make sense, and nobody seems to know who made them up!), fines should be tied to the rates. The Mayor made his decision, we should follow.
- Denial puts the non-profits in a very difficult situation. They took a gamble situating there. They were promised a garage. Lots there are being bought up; there is no additional space. Some lots are on a 60-day vacate notice. The non-profits could face a situation where there is no parking, and it would take 16 months to build a garage.
- Denial is basically telling everybody to not follow the rules. The whole point is to obey the law. It makes no sense to have a fine less than what it would cost to park. Some people simply won’t follow the rules.
- We will eventually support a parking deck. BPA has provided a path to pay for it. There is no taxpayer money. The garage is paid for by people who use it. The only risk for the taxpayer is if BPA defaults, but BPA’s “financials are fine,” and they could get funding on their own but at a higher rate without City backing.
- BPA as a whole supports the garages. Nobody has \$20m to build a garage. The Walnut and North St. garages were not built with their own funds. The money came from the BPA as a whole.
- He thinks that BPA sees tabling as politics and recommends voting not tabling even if the result turns out to be for denial. BPA is in to parking not politics. BPA was reading the “tea leaves” when it suggested tabling as ok.

Councilwoman Van Wirt

CW Van Wirt made 4 points:

1) The rates don’t have to go up January 1. We should work together on timing. Everybody understands the problem with rate and fine disparity, but rates do not have to go into effect January 1.

2) If BPA finances are so great, we should not have to be raising rates on backs of taxpayers. Authorities were created to leverage their own debt and not put it on the taxpayer. It's ok for BPA to get their own bonds, taking risk off taxpayers, and if their finances are in good shape, they can pay the higher rate

3) The Walnut St. Garage is in the Central Business District, so there is a viable reason for City to provide financial support. Moreover, the Walnut already exists so that if it needs to be replaced, that's a logical use of the money and of taxpayer-backed debt.

4) She's hoping that CC and BPA can work hand in hand. They are stronger together. Being open and transparent gets things done faster and better. And everybody ends up more satisfied.

Councilman Waldron

CM Waldron was the clean-up man. Everybody agrees fines have to be raised. This is the first opportunity for Council to be part of the conversation of what parking means for our City. It makes sense to ask BPA what their 1yr goal, 5yr goal, and overall idea of parking within the City is. Polk is the "hot ticket item." It is understood that the meter rate increase goes toward Polk and the fine increase to Walnut. But Walnut dollars are not needed right now, and "ultimately getting a full plan on what Polk St. will be, a timeline for that, what the funding will look like, is the best approach." CC asked for a business plan and didn't get it, so there's not a lot of confidence in BPA long-term planning. It feels like they are making it up as they go because of lack of information. Maybe lack of communication rather than lack of planning is the problem. Tabling is the right move now and Council will approve fine increases when appropriate.

Video by Owen Gallagher