

The Mayor's speech at City Council November 19

The Bethlehem Gadfly | City government, Ethics, Serious Issues | November 21, 2019

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I have been attending City Council meetings since I was in high school. I have witnessed and participated in the debates over many controversial issues: selling the landfill, the casino, rezoning Lowes, and single hauler, just to name a few. Debate was intense with strong opinions, but personal attacks were not part of the process.

Having spent 18 years as a member of city council, 8 of them as president, and nearly 6 years as Mayor, I am more aware than anyone of the importance of the relationship between the administration and city council.

Bethlehem City Council has always been known for its decorum, professionalism and respect for different points of view. We have been the model for many communities on how to conduct government business.

Over the past several months, there has been a major regression from that standard.

I am not talking about votes. I am talking provocative comments and personal attacks which seem to originate from a member of City Council. While, for the most part, meetings proceed normally, the departures are having a disproportionate negative impact on working relationships and Council's reputation. Council members have been unfairly challenged to choose between engaging at the risk of escalation and answer with silence.

At the Council meeting on November 6, this behavior appeared again. This time it was directed across the dais at a member of my administration.

The personal attack was unprovoked, out of order, without cause and completely out of line.

The members of my administration are professionals. They work hard for the city and value the working relationship they have with City Council.

I will not subject members of my administration to any more personal attacks in the future.

The budget meeting on November 13 again illustrated the basis for my concerns. A protracted challenge about offering discounted golf balls to students at the driving range devolved into another unseemly interlude. Decorum suffered again when a Council member did not get the answers he wanted.

Since Bethlehem became a mayor-council form of government in 1961, it has been a tradition that the mayor and his cabinet attend city council meetings.

There are important benefits to having them there:

1. to continue the partnership with council;
2. to explain items on the agenda;
3. to offer feedback to questions; and
4. to try to resolve problems for citizens.

In the future, if there is another unwarranted personal attack on a member of my administration, of the type we saw on the 6th, I will consider changing that tradition.

To conclude, I want to emphasize that I regard all of you as good friends and colleagues. I highly value the good working relationship with each of you. I fully expect that to continue. However, there have been some recent departures from decorum and professionalism that I feel obligated to address. I do this not only for Council and the members of my administration, but also to meet the expectations of Bethlehem's 76,000 residents.