

# The Issue of Parking Fees and Fines Now before the Mayor and Council: Part 3 (25)

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

*(25th in a series of posts on parking)*

The BPA proposal to raise parking meter rates and fines is the first “serious issue” that the “Bethlehem Gadfly” is covering. I hope you will see it as a model for what Gadfly is trying to achieve here.

***Serious talk about serious issues by serious people from all sides. Healthy dialogue. Good conversation.***

Gadfly sees it as his job to fairly frame issues for focused discussion. Hence, here he has taken time to lay out both sides, the BPA/Desman report and the mostly contrary views expressed at the Sept 20 public meeting. Laid them out, I think (hope), without prejudice.

Gadfly is a process kind of guy with an eye for bumpy logic and contradictory thinking (as well as the proper use of commas — in a past life he was known as “Conan the Grammarian”). When he speaks, it is most likely to be focused on such things whichever side of the issue it is. Gadfly likes to hear everybody speak, especially the little guy, who has no power but common sense and personal conviction.

But when the Gadfly takes position on issues, he hopes that it will be evident it comes after understanding all sides.

Ha! after that pious prologue, let me shotgun, in no especial order, some reactions to this parking proposal, with, first, a wave of the Gadfly wings to Desman for pulling a lot of threads together.

- At the Sept 20 meeting, Jake (whose last name I missed. Does anyone recognize him from the video? I would like to give him credit) asked if there was cost-cutting in the report. I believe the BPA answer, forthrightly, was “no.” Such honesty. I appreciate the candor. But I thought that was telling. It sounded like a question that was unanticipated. It sounded as an activity that was not considered. Jake went on to say that’s the first thing you do around the house when money gets tight. Yes. Yes, it is. Now Gadfly is new to the “talk” that goes around

and tries not to bother with it anyway. But I sense that there's a feeling that BPA is kind of arrogant. And that interchange wasn't good. It's "our" money, for god's sake! Wouldn't it have been simply better strategy to show that though I'm coming after "you" the Bethlehem resident for money, I'm tightening my belt as I do so. As a matter of fact, after having lived "in" the Desman report for a couple of hours, I think there are some positive things that could have been said to Jake's question. Jake Noname comes out of nowhere and disappears into nowhere (ha! like Clint Eastwood in some of those great westerns), but he left a BIG impact on my mind.

- I thought the point about comparison cities for the data collection was excellent. Again, I'm new. It's quite possible that Desman has been around the City doing studies for a long while. It might make sense on a certain level to have the same consultant. Consistency. But the choice of cities has a kind of textbook ("industry standards") feel to it. As if it were done by someone not a native, more in touch with balance sheets than the pulse of the downtowns. Yii, I could be way off. But that's how it felt. Honestly. Who, indeed, are our peers? That's the beginning of a great conversation (that Bruce A. Haines should host in the Tap Room). But I don't sense that BPA/Desman thought to ask that question in a way outside some obvious cold similarities. At Lehigh where I taught along with Asa Packer we were often asked to come up with comparison schools for salary purposes – and it made a big difference if we could make a case that Yale was a peer not Podunk U. And we were often asked what schools we would like to be like – aspirational comparisons. Wow, that can get the juices flowing. I started to think of the excitement that might come from talking about what those other cities were doing. I'd have loved to see a line item in Desman's budget with funds to go to 3-4 out-of-the-box places at the early stages of the study.

- And then there was Jean Tobias (I hope I have her name right). Maybe everybody knows her. But I've been coming to Council and other meetings rather religiously since January and don't remember having seen her. Quiet. Polite. Asking dynamite questions. *Are there any studies from other cities that increased their rates? Did they have the same amount of people visiting, or was there a reduction in foot traffic. Are there studies of the impact of rate increase on small businesses before we go ahead with our increase?* Studies? The answer was we consulted no studies but we have "expectations." O, my, Gadfly thought that was an embarrassing moment. Hate to say it. But that was an embarrassing moment. We collected data, but we consulted no studies. They must be out there. So, say, Scranton, raised their meter rates, and we will raise ours to align with them and feel good about it. Ok, ok, but what happened because of that raise? With merchants? With shoppers? That's what we want to know. If I can come back in another life, I will just pick up the phone and call the newspaper in, say, Scranton, and ask, "say, you guys must have covered the parking hike – what happened?" Like Jake, Jean appeared and disappeared, like a cloud.
- There's talk in the report about extensive interaction with stakeholders. But at the end here there are, to me, missing "voices." Now the Gadfly is an outsider. There is no reason for him to be "in the know." There might be a lot of stuff going on I don't know about. I get it. That's as it should be. But I would have thought that in this report or certainly at the public meetings or maybe in the publicizing of this report that there would be substantial proof-positive of support from merchants *and* the public. The only merchant I know of at the Sept 20

meeting beside Bruce A. Haines was Bruce E. Haines (how could this happen! “Of all the gin joints . . .”), and he didn’t seem all that on board with the study. I love the DBA website – it is super cool! – wonderfully enticing and inviting – so much about my own town that I don’t know – but I nudged around to DBA members apprising them of the interest of the Gadfly website on this issue saying we needed to hear from them and got little response. Of course, they don’t know me – no reason to open up to me. I get it. But what seems to me their silence is striking. I would like to know where “they” stand. And as far as the public, well, there are some caution-laden responses on the Desman survey about raising prices. And a poster on the blog has already registered some consumer pain. Is this one of those situations in which the public will be caught unawares and the transition goodies planned to make the pill go down will be ever so necessary? Will the fact that we charge the same as Scranton make people smile and fork over the extra coin? I sense some latent hostility to the last garage. Is telling the public we need another one going to go down smoothly? I know the City is rolling out a communications survey. So much needed. We have to figure out how to get info to people in better ways. And from people in better ways. The Gadfly is a writing teacher (sigh . . . was), and the first question he asked of students was, “who is your audience?” The audience envisioned for this report feels like the beancounters. And I kept thinking about the merchants and the patrons.

- Is the site of the proposed Polk St. garage within the CBD? The Gadfly, frankly, doesn’t know the full import or the ramifications of that question, but it sounded serious and wasn’t answered. It hangs in the air. Polk St. feels like an elephant in the room that Gadfly needs to hear more about.

- Is TIF funding possible to underwrite the costs of the garage? I didn't know what TIF was till Grubb and Faccinnetto elucidated on the blog. Maybe TIF is not available, but the subtext of Dana's question is, have you tried alternative sources of funding? Good question. That answer would have been good to hear – ha! consoling – even if the answer was we did but no-go.
- Now as my father used to say, “Little Eddie, you don't know shit from shinola.” Old style. Tough love. But he was right, I don't know shit from shinola. All I know is talk of making free parking fiscally feasible (alliteration, thank you) and doing variable rate pricing with our hyped-up new parking meters sounded sooooo intriguing. One would like to feel that new, exploratory, creative, cutting-edge techniques were on the table when proposals are cookin'.
- I believe Desman suggests we get our stuff together and plan for the repair/replacement of the Walnut St. garage, which feels like the other elephant in the room. Gadfly isn't sure who gets to make the decision. Feels like the kind of choice that whomever makes it will want to leave town right away. In either case, Walnut St. feels like a bit of a nightmare. Is somebody looking at this? And I guess I mean seriously looking at what happens to parking while either alternative is in process. Commission another study by Desman? Gadfly would like to know more here.

Enough! Enough! There are some honest reactions in no particular order after diving deep into the issue over three long posts. Where's your mind on this BPA/Desman proposal? The Mayor is deciding right now. The Gadfly wants to feel good about the important decisions on the horizon. And would love to see some good conversation here that would help inform the Mayor and Council members how we feel and what we value. Healthy dialogue.

Gadfly