

# What does removing Councilman Callahan as liaison to the Parking Authority mean?

The Bethlehem Gadfly City government, Ethics December 9, 2019

 Latest in a series of posts on Ethics and City Government 

*The Bethlehem Press is a weekly, so it's a beat behind in this article covering the ethics matter, but it is a good refresher on the events.*

*Douglas Graves, "Council member, mayor clash." Bethlehem Press, December 4, 2019.*

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Until the end of the December 3 City Council meeting, Councilman Callahan was Council's "liaison" to the Bethlehem Parking Authority.

At that point, on a motion by Councilman Reynolds that passed 5-2 (Councilman Colon voting with Councilman Callahan in the minority), Councilman Callahan was relieved of that position — "stripped of his role," as one of our beat reporters put it — as described in our previous post in this series.

What does that mean? What exactly is a "liaison"?

A quick-and-dirty Google search that anybody can do comes up with such applicable definitions of "liaison" as these:

- a person who establishes and maintains communication for mutual understanding and cooperation
- a person who is a channel for communication between groups

- a person who helps organizations or groups to work together and provide information to each other
- a person who functions as a connection or go-between, as between persons or groups
- a person who connects two or more separate entities or parts of a whole so that they can work together effectively

Gadfly has always imagined City Council as the hub of city governance as outlined in this [modest proposal post](#) months ago, in which he imagined the various elements of city government like the independent Authorities attending and reporting at City Council on a regular basis.

To keep channels of communication open, robust, and lively.

So, as it were, the right-hand knows what the left-hand is doing.

So the idea of Council members as “liaisons” strikes Gadfly as a good one.

Councilman Callahan was liaison to the Bethlehem Parking Authority. The only other Council liaison Gadfly has heard about is Councilman Reynolds’ role with the Environmental Advisory Council, but he is not sure if that is an official role voted on by Council. Gadfly does not remember any other liaisons spoken of in the almost two years he has been Council-watching.

The only BPA meeting that liaison Councilman Callahan attended in the year that Gadfly has been going to those meetings was the August 28 meeting in which the vote was taken on Polk Street Garage that was the occasion of the suggested unethical behavior by AMK and about which it was claimed by Councilman Reynolds that Councilman Callahan acted improperly in asserting bias in the City evaluation report. Councilman Callahan did not speak (or vote, liaisons do not have votes) at that BPA meeting.

In contrast, City Business Administrator Eric Evans attended several meetings during this period as, Gadfly assumes, the City liaison to the BPA.

BPA minutes going back to December 2017 (that's as far back as they go on the [BPA web site](#)) show that the August 28, 2019, meeting was the only BPA meeting that Council liaison Callahan attended in the now two-year period.

Gadfly cannot remember a time in that two-year period that Councilman Callahan officially reported to Council in his role as liaison.

To be fair, not much in-depth business seems to be discussed at BPA meetings, as Gadfly has often noted in these pages, so maybe Councilman Callahan made the judgment that his attendance was not especially worthwhile. But attending only one meeting in two years is noteworthy — one is tempted to say egregiously noteworthy.

Councilman Callahan has said at times at Council, however, that he is in regular personal contact with the BPA Board chairman and the Executive Director. And he has shown himself frequently as “in the know.” So he has been getting BPA information somewhere.

For instance, Gadfly remembers Councilman Callahan reporting that he had such outside-the-public-meetings contact several times a week during the brouhaha over meter fees and violation fines during the middle and end of 2018. There was no meaningful discussion of these matters at the BPA Board meetings during which anyone could know BPA thinking even if present.

For a recent instance, at the December 3 Council meeting Councilman Callahan “leaked” the seemingly confidential information that the BPA Executive Director is leaving his position, seemingly in dissatisfaction — seemingly showing he is privy to inside information and information that perhaps the people it concerned didn't want revealed.

Liaisons are go-betweens, links, channels, connectors — a way of each separate body knowing what the other is doing. In that sense, in Gadfly's perspective, liaisons are utilitarian, passive — usually not policy makers, nor advocates unless so explicitly designated, so explicitly tasked by their home body.

Frankly, Gadfly felt that during that period of 2018 Councilman Callahan was acting more of an advocate for the BPA position rather than just a reporter of it. Maybe that's a fine line. And certainly "as Councilman" rather than "as liaison," Councilman Callahan would be free to put forward his own positions. The fact that he was liaison doesn't mean that he always had to be neutral or quiet.

Councilman Callahan made just such a distinction between speaking as "councilman" and "liaison" just before the vote on Mr. Reynolds' motion to remove him, as we can see in the last video clip in the previous post in this series — indicating that he would continue to speak about parking matters, for "parking is a very important thing in the City of Bethlehem" and "as all Council members, we all have opinions on parking issues."

(Note, however, that in that last video clip in the previous post in this series Councilman Callahan suggests that Councilwoman Van Wirt not be allowed to even discuss Parking Authority matters much less vote on such matters. He not only turns the tables by accusing her of something, he ups the ante. Beautiful. Gadfly will return to this point in a later post.)

So what does the successful motion to remove Councilman Callahan as liaison to the Parking Authority really mean?

It will not silence him on BPA issues.

He can still call reports biased that are unfavorable to a business for which his brother works.

It does not look like the motion will change either Council or BPA business one whit. Liaison to the BPA is not that crucial a role.

Rather, to Gadfly the import of Council action is essentially symbolic.

It's a rebuke, a reprimand, a scolding.

It's a letter in Councilman Callahan's file.

It's a permanent mark on his record.

It's a red flag waved.

It's a badge of distrust.

It's a wagging finger.

It's dropping one shoe.

It's a road sign planted.

It's a shot across the bow.

It's squinty eyes.

*(A faithful follower — ever educative, ever insightful, sometimes critical — likes metaphorical language. These last for him.)*

It's a warning that we are watching you.

This was not a trivial act.

*to be continued . . .*