

Councilman Callahan: “We have to find some way to help these businesses survive this”

The Bethlehem Gadfly coronavirus December 16, 2020

 *Latest in a series of posts on the coronavirus* 

While not blaming anybody, including the governor, Councilman Callahan pressed Council and the Mayor to support the open container relaxation, calling attention to the importance of the restaurants to the vitality of the Northside downtown and calling attention to the sale of liquor as the source of their greatest profit margin. The Councilman recognized that the relaxation was a small thing, that it wouldn't solve all problems, but that it would help these important small businesses survive. “It's our job to help alleviate some of the pain,” the Councilman said, for businesses around for 15-20 years will not survive into February. If they close, it will be a “shame,” and we're going to have a “hole” in the City. This is the least we can do to help them make it through the next couple of months, the Councilman argued, hoping to get the issue resolved right then at the meeting. The Mayor had previously said in a memo to Council that a positive effect of relaxation was “questionable” and “debatable,” but Councilman Callahan urged Council to go with the “professionalism” of the restaurant owners (5 mins.).

Councilman Callahan's push for action ran into a snag. The Solicitor ruled that the request should be in writing. Councilman Callahan countered by asking that a letter he sent to Council a few days ago be considered the “written declaration,” pointing out that the next two weeks (3 actually) before Council meets again are the crucial downtown shopping time and waiting till then to approve action would not be good. The Councilman asked for a show of “unity,” but “If it's not the will of

Council to help out the downtown businesses, I understand.” Perhaps sensing that there was something a bit snarky in Councilman Callahan’s words, President Waldron affirmed that he was certain all Council members wanted to support local business but that they couldn’t change the ordinance then under new business and that there were legal issues involved. The Mayor then entered the conversation affirming that the City has done “everything possible” to help the small businesses, but “on this issue, there’s reservations about legality and precedent” and Musik-Fest is a little different. Councilman Callahan countered that, though he didn’t know the legalities, there were many events (which he named) in which the open container law was relaxed. Continuing to push, and assuming Council was with him (indeed Councilpeople Negrón and Colon did speak in favor of something being done), Councilman Callahan urged the Mayor to talk with the Downtown Business Association, the City Solicitor, and so forth again to see what could be done since now is the precise time that such a relaxation would have the most impact (6 mins.).

So that’s where we are left.

Decision-making interruptus.

Councilman Callahan is a stubborn man. And Gadfly has had occasion to chafe at the way his stubbornness has been irritating and self-defeating. But here his stubbornness seems a virtue.

The legalities the Mayor refers to were not explained.

The difference between this request and the Musik-Fest-type events was not explained.

What the City is choking on is not clear.

And while Gadfly was writing this Peter Crownfield commented on the previous post, indicating the decision should be a no-brainer, wondering about the ordinance to begin with.

Without such explanations, Gadfly has to feel that the prohibition against open containers should be waived and by Mayoral decree if necessary.

What are you thinking?

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