

“We have an opportunity to do something truly momentous”

The Bethlehem Gadfly Community Engagement Initiative, George Floyd killing, Ochs, Holona July 9, 2020

 *Latest in a series of posts responding to the George Floyd killing* 

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To: City Council

Thank you for the opportunity to address Council. As a lifelong resident of the City of Bethlehem, I've been proud to see our community stand up through marches, protests, letters, and phone calls against institutionalized racism which permeates both our immediate community and our society as a whole. I'm pleased to see Council taking a stand and working on these issues, but as you move forward, I'd like to offer a few items for consideration:

Community engagement is only a part of the solution to improving policing in the City of Bethlehem. We need to commit to simultaneously evaluating and establishing policies on citizen oversight; evaluate and develop action plans for improving department demographics, recruitment, and outreach; research and implement alternatives to policing for dealing with individuals in mental health crisis (to avoid repeatedly tasing and incarcerating individuals like my former neighbor); and finally, through community engagement, discussion, and training, address the long history of institutionalized racism and implicit bias that has led to the current state of affairs in our country as a whole.

Let's invite local experts on policing to provide guidance and feedback on potential policies. Professor Holona Ochs from Lehigh University has dedicated much of her career to researching effective community strategies for working with police departments. I don't know her personally, but I know that we have a scholar of community participation in policing and its intersection with race in our midst. Let's base our approaches on evidence supported by research by inviting her to the planning table.

As far as community engagement goes, I've participated in a lot of community engagement initiatives in the past, as a participant, facilitator, planner, door-knocker, funder...etc. I've seen what works and what doesn't, and I know that saying "Community Engagement" is not sufficient to ensure that the community is truly engaged in a conversation. I appreciate the sentiment behind the proposed resolution, but I think we need to do more, and demand more, before we set the stage for a mediocre initiative with all the usual suspects (and up until a few months ago, I would have been one of them). A few ideas to consider:

Engage a single, paid person to lead this initiative. As someone who has worked in the world of underpaid, overworked community folks for my entire career, I know that you need a single individual dedicated to a project as one of their primary responsibilities for something like this to TRULY work. And yes, this is possible, and worth it—I'm happy to suggest a few places that this money could come from. And this person NEEDS to speak Spanish.

The Administration should NOT be in the position of deciding who participates in this initiative. With all due respect to the Administration, they do NOT have the contacts, trust, nor awareness of our communities of Color and other marginalized groups in the City to be able to create an effective structure to truly engage the broader community in effective discussions. I know this because:

In the three years that I have been a member of the Bethlehem Human Relations Commission (the entity responsible for investigating instances of discrimination in the City), they have appointed ONLY White members—repeatedly. We have one member who identifies as Latino, and no Black, Asian-American, indigenous, or immigrant members. A reminder that the City of Bethlehem is currently:

28.6% Latino (of any race)

59.4% White

6.5% Black

2.9% Asian

2.6% mixed race

When establishing the new Community Engagement Initiative that is scheduled to meet next week, the ONLY Latino person that they invited to represent the Latino community was my husband—a White-passing recent immigrant from South America—when 20% of the City of Bethlehem is specifically Puerto Rican. If you don't see the problem with that, then you should be educating yourself on Hispanic/Latino heritage and culture before you try to lead an engagement initiative within the Latino community

Not only should the Administration not be in the position of leading the initiative, but organizations shouldn't be the primary focus, either. As a former representative of an organization, I can tell you stories of negative interactions with Police in the City of Bethlehem, but wouldn't you rather hear from the individuals who know what it's like to have obscenities screamed at you in a language you don't understand by a police officer (an incident I witnessed)? Don't you want to hear directly from the homeless individual who was tracked down and searched by Lehigh and Bethlehem Police and forced to sign a document saying he would never set foot on Lehigh's campus ever again, for the simple "crime" of visiting campus in search of a psychology professor who could give him feedback on a peer mentoring proposal for individuals with traumatic brain injuries? Don't you want to hear from him, a peer mentor for homeless individuals, about potential solutions for policing? Yes, this is hard—it requires a lot more time and effort than reaching out to the director of a non-profit and asking them to attend a meeting. But I've learned through experience that if you do the hard work to build trust and relationships, you can create effective community engagement—and the end result is always worth it.

I'm here because I believe that we are at an important moment in our community's history, and we have an opportunity to do something truly momentous. But unless we focus on doing it the right way—by relying on experts in our community to provide advice, supporting community members with deep neighborhood ties to lead the charge, and taking the time to build relationships not with other organizations or the usual suspects, but with the very folks that are marginalized—then we are doomed to another series of community meetings where the same folks

talk, the same folks listen, and nothing changes. It takes courage to yield power to folks that might come up with ideas and solutions that you don't like, or that might challenge you and your place in the power structure. As a White woman working in a community where the majority of my program participants didn't look like me, I had to talk myself down frequently from reacting defensively to folks sharing their truths. But the heart of the matter is, for those of you who are White and middle class sitting at that table—this isn't about you, and it isn't about me, either. But we are in the place to use our privilege to take real, serious, progressive, boundary-pushing action, and I am confident that this Council is capable of doing it. Please think seriously about amending your resolution to call for more specific, concrete action. If I can be of any assistance, don't hesitate to reach out. Thank you.

Anna Smith

This was a phone comment at the July 7 City Council meeting. Gadfly finds much wisdom here.