

False Statements and Fact-Checking

The Bethlehem Gadfly City government, Serious Issues June 28, 2019

(The latest in a series of posts on City government)

Bill Scheirer is an economist who grew up in Bethlehem, spent 40 years in DC, and retired here in 2003. He is a life member of the Committee of 100 on the Federal City and was on the Mayor's Task Force for the City of Bethlehem Comprehensive Plan, Zoning Ordinance, and Zoning Map.

Gadfly suspects this post references [Councilman Callahan's challenges](#).

Gadfly:

Recently there have been a couple of discussions at the Bethlehem City Council about false statements being made and the consequent need for fact checking. I feel that the bottom line is that we have to allow for opinions. A statement that is clearly an opinion is not a false statement, because it is only an opinion. Conversely, an opinion presented as a fact is a false statement. Suppose you make a statement that is clearly an opinion. If I call it a false statement, I am actually the one making a false statement. And if I respond by offering my opinion as a fact, then I am making another false statement. When it is uncertain whether or not a statement is an opinion, the words "in my opinion" would be useful.

Let me illustrate with the proposed number of apartments on the Martin Tower tract. The 528 apartments proposed is a fact, assuming the press coverage has been accurate and that I remember it correctly. When I say that it is difficult for me to imagine someone wanting to live there, that is clearly an opinion, since I am reporting on my imagination, and there is no way anyone else could know my imagination better than I. When I say

that the proposed number is bad planning and bad marketing, that is also clearly an opinion, since there is no way I could state that as a fact, since I am not the repository of all such knowledge. Now Woodmont Mews has 204 apartments. This is a fact, if the web site is correct. It is also a fact that the Martin Tower apartments would then be 2.5 times the number of Woodmont apartments. There will be some people that will find Martin Towers to be too much of the same thing, but would not feel the same way about Woodmont Mews. This is clearly an opinion, since there is no way of knowing this beforehand. If this opinion turns out to be true, then it will be harder to fill up the Martin Tower tract than it was to completely rent Woodmont Mews. This last is a true statement because it depends upon an “if clause”.

In our discussions, let's make room for opinions, as long as they are obviously or clearly identified as opinions.

Bill

Gadfly #2's mind is a joy to behold.