

# City budget doin's this week

The Bethlehem Gadfly Budget, Lehigh Valley Good Neighbors Alliance November 30, 2020

 *Latest in a series of posts on the City Budget* 

## **Mayor Robert Donchez 2021 Budget Address**

### **View the Mayor's 2021 Proposed Budget**

There's a regular City Council meeting tomorrow night Tuesday December 1, and Thursday night December 3 is the final (#4) budget hearing.

There is a good chance that there will be significant public comment about the budget both Tuesday and Thursday.

Gadfly is not sure how much budget discussion by and among the Council members will take place Tuesday night, but Thursday is the time Council traditionally focuses on horse-trading, making amendments, and attempting to finalize the budget. There should be much discussion Thursday night. Gadfly urges you to join in.

Gadfly encourages you to "attend" the Thursday budget session for sure. You can expect to see all Council members in action. And that's what we live for on Gadfly.

The final vote on the 2021 budget takes place at the City Council meeting December 15, and Gadfly supposes that there could be more discussion and amendment-making then too.

Gadfly reminds you that City Council has ultimate budget power.

What we will be seeing in the next two weeks is Council exercising its highest responsibility.

It is our responsibility to be paying attention.

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What are the visible budget issues so far?

Let's face it — tough year financially. The Mayor called it a gut-punching year, the worst he's faced in his two terms. Thank you pandemic.

Beside general belt-tightening, the Mayor is proposing to cut 4 firefighters, 2 Service Centerers, and raise taxes 5% (\$46 for the average home owner).

Gadfly has not heard a dollar figure put on the personnel cuts, but he will guess the proposed saving is in the \$500,000 range. He would welcome more authoritative figures.

The City's financial rating has been excellent, and there seems general consensus that personnel-wise the City runs a lean ship.

So far, Councilman Callahan is the only one floating specific counter-proposals to the Mayor's budget.

Cutting staff is always nasty, but it's even more so now because the firefighters are on the front line of public safety. Will the cuts make us less safe?

Councilman Callahan has talked vigorously about the necessity to save the personnel cuts, most particularly the firefighters.

He has floated a plan to cut building inspectors in the Department of Community and Economic Development, though no dollar figures were attached to this proposal either, so Gadfly can't be sure how far, if enacted, that plan would go toward saving firefighters.

Councilman Callahan also has taken aim at \$40,000 matching funds to a state and county collaboration to fund a feasibility study for a pedestrian/bike bridge across the Lehigh — calling it a “luxury” and bad optics when families and businesses are struggling to survive in these hard pandemic times.

The police budget is a wild card in Gadfly's mind.

There has been a steady drumbeat of pressure to reimagine the nature and duties of the police department, especially in the last several meetings by members of and supporters of **Lehigh Valley Stands Up**.

In early post-GeorgeFloyd meetings, some Council members seemed inclined to consider changes in the nature and duties of the department, though two said without equivocation they would not defund.

The police department itself is instituting a pilot program aimed at addressing some of the goals of the “reimaginers,” and, though generally deemed inadequate by those “reimaginers,” Gadfly's sense is that Council generally sees that program as a positive step. The police initiative might take the steam out of other plans for change.

Thus, in regard to the police department Council has, to public view, so far kept its powder dry.

However, the **Lehigh Valley Good Neighbors Alliance** — a Back the Blue group — has said it has heard from two highly placed sources that a Council defunding plot is afoot, and LVGNA is mobilizing members and

the general public to resist it. Their **petition** to “defend” the police department has 7,000+ signatures.

And, hence, as Gadfly just posted, their appearance on the WAEB Bobby Gunther Walsh radio program (790AM) at 9:40 this morning.

But, as indicated already, all Gadfly can say is that he has seen no definite visible signs of such a Council plan in regard to the police.

An interesting and important week ahead, my followers.