

Councilman Callahan's challenges

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

As Gadfly reiterated in a recent post on CM Callahan, “One of the goals of the Gadfly project is to help us know our Councilpersons better, especially when it comes time to vote. Council meetings are now on video, so residents can judge for themselves.”

But Gadfly would like to italicize another thread concerning CM Callahan from the May 22 City Council meeting.

That thread had two parts. CM Callahan offered a challenge to both the public and to his fellow Council members.

1) Fact-Checking the public

In two sections of the meeting, CM Callahan referred to recent inaccuracies by two specific clearly identified residents in public comment as well as a cluster of resident inaccuracies from several months before as context for his conscious decision to now act — seemingly on behalf of Council — as a kind of “fact-checker” (Gadfly’s term, not CM Callahan’s), thus challenging the public to be more accurate.

Listen to the section of the [City video of the May 22 Council meeting](#) beginning at min. 38:24.

Watch the first part of the [City video](#) beginning at min. 1:23:40.

“I think what we need to be in fairness to everybody and openness is that when things are said and stated during public comment that are untrue, and incorrect and false, I think it’s incumbent on us to try to correct the record.”

“I have decided in the last couple months – and I don’t want anybody taking anything personal that I ever say here because we obviously have, there’s some people on Council that have some disagreements and some a lot more than others – and I probably . . . about two months ago we had a bunch of people coming up and just stating false facts . . . and I just decided that at some point things have to be corrected and for people to come up and say false things and that just aren’t true or unfactual, I just thought that from this point on during New Business I’m going to use that time to hopefully correct the record, and hopefully it challenges people who come up here and speak to be more accurate in what they say.”

Gadfly and Gadfly followers should welcome fact-checking. We are on the outside. We often (but certainly not always) speak from a position of ignorance. We seek truth.

But let’s realize that this is a tricky business CM Callahan is entering on, and we need to ask him to be very, very careful:

- although describing himself “a gentle teddy-bear as much as possible,” CM Callahan sits at the Head Table.
- CM Callahan has the bully pulpit, the microphone.
- CM Callahan has authority, has power, is by virtue of his office intimidating.
- CM Callahan will have — under normal practice at Council meetings — the final and only word on the “facts.”

- the potential for the “chilling effect” on free expression the Supreme Court has warned about or completely closing down public participation is real and great.
- though CM Callahan repeatedly affirms in a “bring-it-on” kind of fashion that he welcomes debate, there will be no debate with the public as he does his fact-checking during the New Business section of Council meetings.

Gadfly hopes that President Waldron and the rest of Council are alert to the perils in this self-conferred role of “Fact-Checker-in-Chief” that CM Callahan has taken on.

2) Sunbathing with Council members

For CM Callahan is challenging his fellow Council members as well as the public.

Watch the second part of the [City video](#) beginning at min. 1:23:40.

“And I think that’s true for us on Council too. I welcome the debate. I think that instead of having phone calls behind the scenes, talking, we everyone on this Council is in agreement that sunshine is a beautiful thing . . . I want to have that debate. We can have disagreements. We can call each other out. If you think I’m saying something that’s unfactual, you can say it. I don’t mind it, I’m not going to take anything personal . But that’s how I want to proceed in the future. I don’t want anyone to take anything personal. But I think it’s better for the City and Council to have those discussions here in open court versus behind-the-scenes, behind the scenes phone calls. I just think it’s a healthier thing to have that discussion where the public can hear it.”

Being an outsider, of course, Gadfly finds this all kind of mysterious.
What exactly is happening behind-the-scenes?