

Melding the medley: listen to the composite commenters

The Bethlehem Gadfly Police August 23, 2020

 Latest in a series of posts about the Bethlehem Police 

*Good conversation builds community.
The Gadfly*

Gadfly loves your voices.

The Voices of the People.

And tries to do all he can to amplify them and assure you that you are listened to.

That's why Gadfly was, frankly, ticked off at last Tuesday's City Council meeting.

All that drama getting a Public Safety Committee meeting scheduled.

The six hours of meeting.

Then thud.

More than 25 people spoke, approaching the witching hour. I think Chair Colon woke one of them up when he called.

Then thud.

Our Councilors *listened* to the public. Gadfly wanted to know what our Councilors *heard*.

They had a week to review, to recollect, to reflect.

Thunk.

So here's what Gadfly heard. Gadfly has slow-walked us through all the public commentary. And, now, combining almost entirely verbatim text that you read in previous posts with a pinch of creative license, Gadfly would like you to imagine a Composite Defunder (think Hispanic male)

and a Composite Defender (think, perhaps, a 50-ish white resident) addressing City Council.

The Composite Defunder

To begin, let me say that I am not anti-police. I am pro-Bethlehem. I am pro my community. But I see a problem with the way we do policing. First, the BPDs own data bears out that people of color are having more police encounters, are having more use of force directed at them. Furthermore, that same data suggests that the Latinx community is not reporting to the police. As an Hispanic male, the answers that were given about the disparities in the use of force were wholly inadequate. And I could tell you about a troubling discriminatory experience my wife and children had with the police. I shouldn't have to say that my wife's skin color is not a threat, shouldn't have to say that my bi-racial children's existence is not resistance. Second, let's talk about the problem with police responding to mental health calls. Introducing members of the community with health issues into the criminal justice system is not helping them. Anguished reports from such people demonstrate that encounters with police are traumatizing even when they don't end with injury or death. The police say that the violence they do to such people is simply "taking them down" to protect them from themselves. To normalize the fact that we are talking about brutalizing a human being as a method of de-escalation is just really not acceptable and alarming. We should not be normalizing these kinds of police behaviors. So, we're saying we need to think about what other people's experience with police has been like. Just like the visceral feeling the 60-something straight privileged white woman feels when she witnesses her South Bethlehem neighbors treated in a way perhaps unlike white folks anywhere. For many of those people, for your black and brown neighbors especially, those not here tonight whom you are pledged to protect, the system is broken. What if we worked hard to recruit residents from our own neighborhoods to become police officers as a means to alleviate discrimination? And when we say defund the police, we are not saying eliminate the police. What we are saying when we say defund the police is we want you to fund appropriate response to mental health situations. When we say defund the police, we are simply saying don't fund them to respond to certain calls — pay social workers, pay mental health professionals instead. We need a city budget that is in line with all our

priorities for all our people. Thank you for the opportunity to speak. Fight the good fight toward, as one of you said, ending systemic racism and creating an equitable city.

The Composite Defender

I'm proud to be a citizen of Bethlehem and proud to have the Bethlehem police. I am very proud of the police department and think that being nationally accredited and accredited by the state shows how far ahead we are as a city. I think we have one of the best police departments in the state. I will go as far as saying we have one of the best police departments in the country. Over the past 10 years Bethlehem Police officers have definitely saved hundreds of lives, probably many more. I don't know what more you can ask from our Chief and our police department. If there are problems, the department is more than capable of working on them. Therefore, any ideas of disbanding or defunding the police are appalling to me. I am just really disgusted with these people who are calling in and attacking our police department. There is no such thing as defunding, dismantling, abolishing the police department. These people are insane. They need to go somewhere and live in Minneapolis where all this stuff is happening. I ask you, who will stop the rape or death of your loved ones if we abolish or defund police departments? Who are these people? What qualifies these radical activists as stakeholders in our community? Black Lives Matter is at its core a Marxist organization, admittedly led by trained Marxists. Would an organization whose goal is empowering Black citizens trash and burn its Black communities to the ground? The overthrow of our government is the goal. There is no appeasing these radicals. One of them even said right out at a Council meeting, "we don't need to hear from any more white people." A lot of people may say that abolishing the police department is different than defunding it, but make no mistake, the goal is to eliminate the police department. I have looked at the statistics, and I was impressed by the very low numbers of the use of force. And, in any event, you have to remember that if people don't comply, then use of force is going to be used. There are 18,000 police departments in the United States. Nationwide, there were 13 or 14 unarmed Blacks killed in 2019 by police. That doesn't sound like systemic racism to me. It saddens me to think

that the unconscionable actions of a few have cast a pall on so many dedicated and honorable police officers. I feel that some of the questions posed by Council seemed like a fishing expedition for bad behavior when there was none. Your meeting is full of professors who live in ivory towers. Maybe we need to expand our views beyond Council's chosen local criminologist. And maybe Council needs to examine its own implicit and explicit biases. Some Council members are struggling to understand the difference between statistics on a page and real life policing; you would do well to participate in a defensive tactics scenario. In conclusion, I love our police department, I respect our police department. If your idea is to turn our city into the likes of Seattle or Minneapolis, don't get too comfortable in those City Council seats. If defunding the police department happens in Bethlehem, I will work diligently to replace each one of you that voted for it. I appreciate your time listening to me.

Resident words were Gadfly's script here. Did Gadfly get it right? Or, if not, how would you capsule and characterize the public "testimony"? What are you thinking after reading these imaginary presentations before City Council? How should City Council respond? How would you respond if you were a Councilperson? Who got the better of the opportunity to present their case? You know Gadfly loves asking you to role play.

The Bethlehem Gadfly