

Gadfly slapped upside the head

The Bethlehem Gadfly Parking March 7, 2020

 138th in a series of posts on parking 

That casual reference in the last post about slapping Gadfly upside the head reminded him.

Gadfly did get slapped upside the head.

Not pleasant. He thinks he will stop saying that. More people will take him up on it.

Public comment. Bethlehem Parking Authority meeting February 26.

Gadfly was winging it as usual. (“Winging,” get it?)

Three things on his mental agenda to talk about as he remembers it.

1) The BPA website: giving a pat on the fanny for changes in an already terrific website for changes that moved the Board meeting link to the more visible top menu and thus easier to find but a reminder that the Gadfly had been asking for months that the agendas for meetings be posted, bringing BPA in line with most of the other ABC’s (Authorities, Boards, and Commissions) in the City as a courtesy for residents.

2) ‘Fessing up: At the February 18 City Council meeting, Gadfly was riding his hobbyhorse again (he had done so as well at the February 4 meeting and other times in the past) about a more rigorous reappointment process for ABC members — a reappointment based on evidence of performance. In doing so he referenced the Parking Authority, as he has done in the past, since a member of the Board was up for reappointment. That generated an interesting discussion on Council that even raised the topic of term limits for certain ABC’s, a conversation Council president Waldron said that he would entertain. (Gadfly audio below, if you want video [City Council video 2 18 20 begin min. 4:20](#))

Audio Player not available in this archive

In those Council discussions both Gadfly and Council members were clear and careful to say that they were not casting aspersions on any specific person but that the focus was on the system, the procedures. Gadfly wanted to be honest with the BPA — though he was not sure that they would have even been aware of the Council comments and discussion — that he had raised this issue with specific reference to the BPA. So he told them, prefacing his remarks with the admission that he knew little of finance and nothing of the nitty-gritty of Parking management but that as a resident his interest was in procedures and policies and rules and transparency and visibility.

February 26 was a BPA reorganization meeting. New year. New beginning. In a sense, a “new” Board (though only the exec director was new). So that it was a good time for Gadfly to repeat what he had said before to them on at least two occasions about being active and creating a record of performance on the minutes for reappointment purposes if they were interested in reappointment.

3) In the same vein, Gadfly said that he was often unclear how decisions were made since in his experience over almost two years there was little substantive discussion of issues at the public meetings. As an example, he used the issue of variable rate parking, which the Mayor had asked the BPA to consider when he approved the parking meter rate increase in late fall 2018 when there was the big controversy over the rates. This idea was raised by members of the public in public meetings, and the BPA was cool about it, yet the Mayor did suggest consideration, and Gadfly was looking forward to BPA discussion and reporting back to the “public” that their words were heard.

Gadfly, as the BPA minutes will show, started asking about such discussion at BPA meetings in March 2019. But there was no sign of talk of variable rate parking during the ensuing months. Then Gadfly was surprised to hear in a Parking Authority presentation to City Council in, he thinks, August or September or October 2019 that there were two consultant reports on the issue, both in the negative. In a later Board meeting, the studies were referred to casually in regard to another issues as costing more than \$25,000. That perked Gadfly’s curiosity. That was a lot of money. Should it have been discussed and voted on at a public meeting?

Gadfly knew (or thought he knew) that the Sunshine law required “creation of liability by contract” to be approved by the Board, and he didn’t remember that happening. So he filed a “right to know” request for the contracts on the consultant reports and other associated material. The requests were filled the day before the Board meeting. The answer on the contract was that “Records that you are requesting do not exist.” Gadfly believes he said how perplexing that was and that he must be missing something in his understanding and that he would consult with the exec director for clarification.

Here’s where it gets interesting. As Gadfly returned to his seat, the BPA chair, rather heatedly in Gadfly’s recollection, said, paraphrasing, “I do not usually answer such questions, but I will here.” And went on to say that by BPA policy, disbursements under (I’m not sure, but I think he said) \$25,000 don’t need to be approved by the Board. Now that sounds reasonable to Gadfly. It would not make sense for every small bill to wait for Board approval.

So it was not the content of his reply that surprised Gadfly. But his agitated tone. As if Gadfly had hit a nerve. Agitated enough, in fact, to arouse the Gadfly’s “Irish.” And the extension to which he took the topic. As Gadfly remembers it, the chair said something about not discussing policy here, that that was the role of Council. I remember feeling that was an odd thing to say. And other things.

Gadfly frankly does not remember the transition but the subject of that mention of variable rate parking at a meeting with Council came up, and Gadfly must have been asking about the involvement of the Board when he said something like “but they weren’t there.” And the chair replied something like “it doesn’t matter, I was there.”

Now Gadfly really wanted to hear the audio record of the meeting (the BPA does not meet in Town Hall where they can be video’d, and thus they do their own audio for public record purposes) for two reasons:

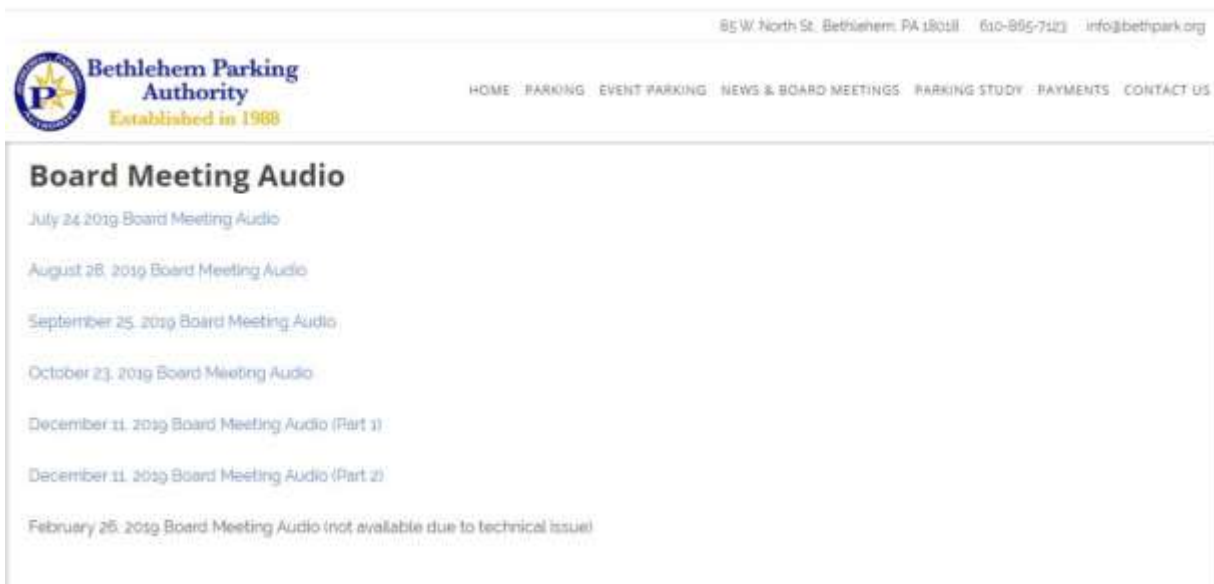
- 1) to find out his tone: was he snarky, angry, gretzy, irritable, irascible? He knows he can be. He wonders if he set the chair off.

2) Gadfly took mental note as it all was happening of two comments by the chair: a) that he was making an exception by answering the Gadfly question and b) the “I was there” phrase.

Gadflies by nature are pests. Gadfly may well have been out of bounds.

Those two comments by the chair — if Gadfly remembered them correctly — fit into the topic of term limits for members of certain ABC’s raised at Council. Gadfly remembers that months and months ago, the Board solicitor, first appointed in 1998, addressed him, rather stentorianly (good SAT word), with “No one questions the Board.” The chair’s preamble about not usually answering questions — if Gadfly remembered it correctly — fits the same pattern of the sense of untouchable power. And if Gadfly also remembers correctly that the chair said all that mattered was that he was present at a meeting might indicate a kind of identification of himself as the Board. Not good. Perhaps marks of a person who’s been in a position too long. The chair’s first term was 2008 according to newspaper records.

So, lots to be resolved, Gadfly was really interested in hearing the tape of the February 26 BPA meeting to try to figure some things out. He’s old, and his memory ain’t what it used to be. But, golly, guess what?



The screenshot shows the website for the Bethlehem Parking Authority. At the top right, the address is 85 W. North St. Bethlehem, PA 18018, with phone number 610-895-7123 and email info@bethpark.org. The logo on the left features a blue circle with a white 'P' and the text 'Bethlehem Parking Authority' and 'Established in 1988'. A navigation menu includes HOME, PARKING, EVENT PARKING, NEWS & BOARD MEETINGS, PARKING STUDY, PAYMENTS, and CONTACT US. The main content area is titled 'Board Meeting Audio' and lists several recordings: July 24, 2019 Board Meeting Audio; August 28, 2019 Board Meeting Audio; September 25, 2019 Board Meeting Audio; October 23, 2019 Board Meeting Audio; December 11, 2019 Board Meeting Audio (Part 1); December 11, 2019 Board Meeting Audio (Part 2); and February 26, 2019 Board Meeting Audio (not available due to technical issue).

Drat! Call me Ahab! (in-joke between me and faithful follower)