Letter to the Mayor about the demonstration ordinance

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

Peter Crownfield is officially retired but spends most of his time working with students in his role as internship coordinator for the Alliance for Sustainable Communities–Lehigh Valley.

Bob —

I understand that the permit ordinance will not be voted on tonight — Please confirm.

In any event, I would like to make these observations about the proposed ordinance:

1. Statements that the new ordinance was "to codify existing practice" were misleading and deceptive at best, because Bethlehem has not required a permit for most of the newly-covered activities.

2. Disruptive or violent behavior is covered under other ordinances and statutes, so this proposed change does not promote greater public safety; what it does is reduce the likelihood of ArtsQuest patrons being annoyed or distracted by messages outside ArtsQuest's control. That is not city business.

3. Requiring people to ask the city's permission to exercise their Constitutionally-guaranteed rights is repugnant and unacceptable. It

would deter some people from participating or speaking out at all, making it profoundly undemocratic.

4. Requiring people to pay a fee to protest, celebrate, or even hold a vigil is an additional deterrent to free speech. Allowing people to apply for a waiver of the fee is not a remedy; it creates situations that are ripe for favoritism or abuse (or the appearance thereof).

5. Free speech must sometimes be exercised at a particular time and place to respond to a particular problem; requiring people to apply in advance is a further disruption of fundamental rights.

In addition to those substantive concerns, it is also disappointing that the City would even consider such a drastic change without discussion with local groups it would seriously effect, limiting or deterring their activities in the public interest.

Peace,

Peter

Peter Crownfield