

Gadfly council forum #1: the budget

[The Bethlehem Gadfly](#) [Candidates for election](#), [Election](#), [Forum](#), [Gadfly Forum](#) March 16, 2021

 *Latest in a series of posts on the Gadfly Forum* 

ref: [Announcing Gadfly candidate forum](#)

ref: [Gadfly forum starts today at noon](#)

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Welcome to the second stage of the first week of the Gadfly Forum!

Yesterday we heard from the candidates for mayor, and we hope we will do so each Monday at noon as we run up to election.

Today — and we hope each Tuesday at noon as we run up to election — we hear from candidates for City Council.

The idea is to know as much as we can about the candidates so that we can be the most informed voters we can be.

Gadfly presents the Council candidates here in the order in which their responses were received in Gadfly headquarters.

Tip o' the hat to the candidates for participating!

The prompt:

Good People: Bryan, Grace, Hillary, Rachel, Kiera

'Tis said that the most important job of City Council is approving the budget. The Mayor proposes, Council disposes. Budgets demand setting priorities. Budgets require hard choices. Choices that often need to be explained to a questioning public. We'd like a window into your thinking about budgets by focusing on a specific complex issue that came before Council last November, and thus in which some of you were involved, and which issue, frankly, gave me pause.

Walkable and bikeable cities are “in.” “Green” is in. The idea of a pedestrian/bike bridge over the Lehigh had been percolating for several years. The idea of such a bridge had substantial support, among individuals, from several dozen community organizations, and the business community. The idea had gained \$100,000 in outside support toward a feasibility study. The issue before Council was committing \$40,000 of City money toward that feasibility study.

I am a walker and biker, I was enthused about the possibility of a study as the first step toward the reality of a bridge on the other side of it. But remember that this was a pandemic year, a year in which, as the Mayor said, the City got a “punch in the gut” and was, for instance, in an \$87m budget eliminating 4 firefighter positions and raising taxes 5%. Serious cutting. Serious increase. So I could not easily discount Councilman Callahan’s view that, though he supported the idea, money spent on the bridge now was a “luxury” and should be put off.

The Gadfly blog covered the heated conversation on this issue, familiar, of course to you incumbents, but with which I encourage you new candidates to gain familiarity by scanning through [pedestrian bridge](#) under Topics on the blog sidebar.

There are good arguments on both sides.

In Gadfly you will find such arguments to eliminate the \$40,000 from the budget as it is only putting the study off for a year, such projects should be paid for by private not public money, much more pressing needs (necessities) could be found for that money (trees, sidewalk repair, ADA ramps), and it simply looks bad in the current economic climate.

Defenders of the study made such arguments as the long-range economic value of a bridge, the long-time concerted community support and effort, the outside support, the minuscule impact on so large a budget

We’d like to know how you incumbents thought through this issue. We’d like to see how you new fresh-eyed candidates think through it. I should say that your thought process is perhaps more important than your conclusion. How did you frame the issue? What reasons carried the most weight? The bridge feasibility study is in the past. We’re interested in a

sense of how you will approach the next hard choice. We're interested in how your mind works.

Thanks for your service, and your willingness to serve.

Kiera Wilhelm

Thank you, first of all, for inviting us to participate in this forum! Your blog provides an energetic and prolific source of information around so many important happenings in this City we love, and I'm grateful for the thoughtful platform—both as a reader, and now as a contributor.



Your prompt contains many rich topics, and I enjoyed the opportunity to consider all of them. The primary question you posed, however, focuses on budgeting: in particular, the complexity of making difficult decisions around budgeting. And *in particular*, the ways in which each of us approach/will approach such matters. I hope this response provides some insight into my approach to complex scenarios such as the one you posed; how I “frame” such things.

As Councilperson, one is charged with the task of doing research; it is an integral part of the job. (But *especially* as a new Councilperson—not having been privy to all previous conversations, documents, debates, community conversations, etc.—it is particularly incumbent upon us “non-incumbents” to invest the time required to information-gather.) Whether by reviewing documents and data, viewing or listening to previous Council meetings, or seeking feedback from members of the community and/or Council who participated in the matter at hand, we must approach all Council matters with as much information and insight as possible. In fact, I did many of those things in preparation for this post.

Budgeting matters can be complex and nuanced. The case of the pedestrian bridge—and the discussion around eliminating \$40K from a pandemic-strapped budget—is no exception. With this in mind, we then ask questions like:

- What stage is the project in? Have financial and logistical commitments already been made, by the City and/or other entities?
- Does the project already enjoy wide support from multiple constituents?
- What impact does the investment have relative to the budget at large? Is it a large percentage of the total budget?
- What negative impact, if any, will the expense have on other areas of the budget?
- What negative impact, if any, would a one-year delay have on the project, or its existing funding?
- What is the scope of potential positive impact of the project, economically or otherwise?

I am aware that in the case of the pedestrian bridge, the research—copious research—had been done, over many years. The project was unanimously supported by Council and enjoyed wide support in the broader community. \$100K in county and state funds had been secured. It has already been deemed a worthy project with anticipated positive impacts on local economy, the environment, public health and safety, tourism, and access/equity. It is with all of these factors in mind that Council ultimately voted to keep the funding allocation in the budget.

For what it's worth, I am one of those members of the community who supports plans for the bridge—for these reasons, and more. Gadfly, your November 16, 2020 post captures the very “human” experience of moving through a City on foot, or on two wheels, or via public transportation. I know this experience, having spent 14 years living in Cambridge, MA—a city that actively engages with the iconic river that runs between it and neighboring Boston; a city in which public transportation is normalized and widely used by all; a city that actively supports and promotes walking and cycling. And now that I am back in Bethlehem, I am fortunate to live and work Downtown, and can engage with our City in a similar way. It unequivocally contributes to my quality of life. Increasing these opportunities for our residents stands to benefit

our City and so many of us in it, in ways quantitative and qualitative alike.

Bryan Callahan

The most important thing that residents need to understand is that there are basically just two ways our City can generate additional revenue to pay our bills. The first is to raise taxes and fees on all the existing properties and property owners in the City. The second way is through smart economic development, by taking an empty lot or rundown property that has a very low tax assessment and then building something on that lot that has a much higher tax assessment/higher taxes paid by the developer, when the project is completed.



The new projects on 3rd and New St (The Benner Building) and the 510 Flats building on 3rd St. are great examples of the latter. The 510 Flats building was an empty stone parking lot forever that paid a couple thousand dollars in taxes per year. The 3rd and New St (Benner Building) was an empty lot for over a decade and also paid a very small amount of taxes due to the fact both lots were empty with no buildings of any value on them. The two developers invested close to \$30 Million each into both of those sites and are currently each paying close to \$300,000 per year in taxes.

My point in bringing this up is, I'd much rather prefer to increase everyone's property values in our City than raise taxes on existing property owners. Every time the City raise taxes on existing property owners, we make our City less affordable for lower and middle income residents.

This is even more true for renters. The bottom line is that the owners of rental units are in business to make money on a long-term investment. They are not investing their money into the rental units to lose money. Thus, whether you want to believe it or not, every time the City raises property taxes/fees, the owners of the rental units don't absorb the

additional taxes/costs. The owners of the rental properties are only passing those costs on to the renters. If you are renting in our City, you know exactly what I'm talking about. Bethlehem is becoming unaffordable to live in for many because we keep raising taxes instead of promoting more smart economic development.

When I ran for council 8 years ago for my first term, I promised to keep Bethlehem Safe and Affordable. I have fought hard on Council to try and make needed cuts in a bloated permits and zoning department and to hold the line on taxes by promoting smart economic development. In 7 years I voted 6 times against raising your taxes. Why? Because every time I've been asked to vote to raise your taxes, I think of the parents of my old Kaywin Avenue friends and neighbors who still live in the same middle class ranch homes on the West Side. They are all retired now and living on fixed incomes. They don't live extravagantly, they love Bethlehem and what it has given them. They pay their bills but because of continued yearly tax increases, they struggle to be able to even afford a simple week vacation each year.

If Bethlehem is going to stay as the cultural center of the Lehigh Valley and Northeast Pennsylvania, we will have to continue to support smart economic development on vacant and condemned properties so we can hold the line on taxes for our current residents and let the developers generate the new tax revenue needed for increases in wages, retirement, and health care costs.

This year I was stunned when my fellow City Council members voted 6-1 to raise your taxes 5% in the middle of a World Pandemic and to cut 4 Fire public safety positions. I was the one and only vote against it!

Hillary Kwiatek

Approving the city's budget is indeed a weighty responsibility of the City Council. It can also be a thankless task, as there are bound to be people who are upset regardless

of which way you vote during good times or bad. If I am elected, it will be my responsibility to seek the most complete information possible, including resident input, and join that with my own inner compass of what is in the best interest of the city and my fellow residents.



It is not my style to take a decision in the heat of a particular moment. I will develop a deep knowledge of what each line item in the budget represents so I am prepared to make those tough choices. This can't be accomplished over a few meetings once a year, so I expect I will be very busy digging in and learning about everything the city does

When I reflected on whether I would have approved the \$40,000 allocation for the pedestrian bridge feasibility study, I first looked to see where the funds would come from. As it was money from the capital budget, I knew that it couldn't be used for ongoing city operations and therefore wouldn't have impacted city services during a difficult year.

I also recognized that Bethlehem's financial participation in the feasibility study was our "skin in the game" in response to the \$100,000 provided by the Commonwealth and Northampton County. During my 10+ years of fundraising for institutions like the Allentown Art Museum and PBS39, I worked on projects that involved partnerships between nonprofits and governments. Whether seeking federal or state grants, we were always required to demonstrate our commitment to the project by providing matching funds. So, I knew that putting Bethlehem funds into the feasibility study represented not only the city's commitment, but also a show of respect for the willingness of other government entities to share their own money toward a city initiative. These are important relationships that we should consider when making decisions as well.

As someone who criss-crosses the river regularly to walk between home and work, I think a pedestrian bridge is an awesome idea. But my own personal preferences aren't among my top criteria. A council member can't only vote for projects they like or would personally get use from. We're a diverse city with diverse viewpoints and needs. For any major

undertaking, I would want to listen to residents, business owners and other stakeholders from impacted neighborhoods.

This particular project emerged from city residents themselves who dedicated years to building a coalition on both sides of the river. Business owners and other major institutions also weighed in with their opinion that the bridge would serve as a community and economic asset. For me, that matters a lot.

Finally, as a city, Bethlehem has shown remarkable resiliency during some of the most challenging times. We have done so by looking to the future not with blind hope, but with plans and determination. When The Steel shut down, we moved forward, diversifying our economy through heritage tourism, business incubators, micro-distilleries, and adaptive re-use of our brownfields. We dwell alongside our colonial and industrial ancestors, but we aren't defined by them.

Yet we remain a city divided, not solely by a river. So, that last gut check for me, after putting in the research and listening to the community, and understanding the context of relationships, will be to ask: Will this project help us move forward as a whole community? Will the result invite all of our residents to more fully take part in the life of our city?

If I can answer that with a firm "yes," then I am likely to vote aye.

Grace Crampsie Smith

I remember when I was running for council my family members and friends who were in political positions always said, "as long you vote your conscience, you'll be

fine." As a counselor, it is vital to look at the total picture and consider all perspectives. While not easy, I have made every effort to vote my conscience, consider all perspectives, and vote for that which I



believe to be in the best interests of my constituents and my city.

Having lived in poverty at times as a child and being a student of the free/reduced lunch program, I learned early on in life the value of a dollar and, consequently, have been quite fiscally conservative throughout my life. This is why the most difficult votes this past year were certainly the budgetary votes.

While I supported the pedestrian bridge in the past, I thought to myself how could I dare support monies toward a feasibility study during a pandemic. A pedestrian bridge is an ideal concept. However, is it really necessary? Ultimately, I made my decision to support the study based upon the fact that monies from the study could not be transferred to an area where it would make a significant impact, many of our community members put forth much effort and time into securing the grants for the study, the grants were time limited, and I directly saw the significant, positive economic and social impact the pedestrian bridge in Jim Thorpe had on that community and beyond this past year. I also consulted with my brother who was County Controller and had a role in making that bridge become a reality.

I really agonized over the budget as a whole — tax increase, new stormwater fee, loss of 4 firefighter positions. So, I met with the mayor and administration and expressed my concerns. I asked the tough questions and based upon the answers decided to do an amendment to the budget to reinstate the firefighter positions. Unfortunately, I did not get the votes to support that. The stormwater fee had been in the works for some time and was a necessity. I proposed a tier fee system such as Carlisle recently implemented. I negotiated with administration, and they came back with an appeal system for those who find the fee a hardship and for those who take measures to offset stormwater runoff.

While my heart breaks for the many individuals and families that suffered financially due to the pandemic, the city also suffered a significant financial blow, and the tax increase could not be avoided — unless of course we waited and then were forced to implement a much larger tax increase next year. I felt it best to do an increase this year vs a much more significant one next year.

Overall, I still have some doubts re: my budgetary votes, but that is the nature of the beast, and I will continue to vote my conscience knowing that often votes can be quite heart-wrenching. Did I make the best decisions during these budgetary votes? I still question if I did and probably always will. Ultimately, I made the decisions I thought needed to be made at that time, and I must live with that and move on.

I will continue to vote my conscience and consider all perspectives!

Rachel Leon



Looking into City Council's previous discussion of the pedestrian bridge provides insight on how the current council approaches citizen-driven initiatives.

Council's focus has been on economic and aesthetic issues related to the bridge, which are important, but I think we need to bring the issue of accessibility and safety into the conversation.

During a time of economic uncertainty, a bridge may, at face value, seem to be an unnecessary expense. But this issue does not concern me for two reasons. First, there are many grants for infrastructure that can be used to pay for the construction of the bridge, and these funding opportunities may increase as the federal government devotes more money to infrastructure in coming out of the economic downturn related to the pandemic. Second, a bridge that connects pedestrians to restaurants and businesses on Main Street and leads to the restaurants and businesses that also exist in South Bethlehem will encourage more exploration of what our city has to offer. Although I believe a pedestrian bridge will be of constant value to our community, I think it will really shine during our festival season. Musikfest is, in the words of Mayor Donchez, an economic engine. A pedestrian bridge would also become an attraction to visit as festival goers move from one portion of the city to another. The bridge would be a real investment in the economic future of our city.

The bridge is important because we have an increasingly pedestrian population in Bethlehem. Many choose to walk for environmental or health reasons. But it is important to note that others walk because owning a vehicle may not be practical or even possible. When I returned to Bethlehem from my time in service,** I was without a vehicle until my household goods were delivered. As a pedestrian, I quickly learned how dangerous the walks to and across the bridges can be. Specifically, the New Street (Fahy) Bridge at peak hours is so loud that it is difficult to hear another pedestrian or cyclist behind you trying to pass. While cyclists can share the road with vehicles in some areas, they also ride in the walkways. This is often a safer option, given some tragic accidents that have occurred. Pedestrians on the bridge are also exposed to a lot of air pollution from traffic, and this is especially concerning to me when I think about younger residents who have to cross the bridge on foot every day to get to and from school.

One issue that I don't think has been given sufficient attention in considering a new pedestrian bridge is accessibility. The walkways on our current bridges are on average 6 ft wide. Although this may seem to be ample space to navigate a crossing situation between pedestrians, I think it would be wise to consider not only our cyclist population but also the members of our community that rely on the use of motorized wheelchairs. The PA Department of Transportation manual governing highway design indicates that a 96 inch width is necessary for pedestrian facilities to comply with ADA standards. While there are some variations in width depending on other factors, that is still a two foot discrepancy between our current walking paths and what would be considered accessible by ADA standards. We have a large elderly population in our city, and anyone in a wheelchair should be able to enjoy traversing our beautiful city as a pedestrian. The current bridges do not really make this possible. Foot traffic is what our city needs to thrive economically, environmentally, and as a recognized destination for visitors. A bridge that connects people and businesses on the north and south side of the river while making it easier for people to get out of cars that create traffic and air pollution can add a lot to our city. Council should also support initiatives that emerge from residents, and this one has a great deal of resident support. The current bridges are also insufficient for meeting the ADA accessibility standards, and that problem will be addressed by a pedestrian bridge.

The more I dove into this topic, the more articles I read and audio clips I listened to, the more I realized that there is overwhelming support for this project. Even now, with everything going on, there is still overwhelming support. If our community is saying that this is where they want their tax dollars to go, and they have been loud and clear on this topic, then city council should listen.

**** I enlisted in the US Navy after high school keeping with a family tradition of commitment to service. I spent 10 years as an Operations Specialist/Air Intercept Controller. I was stationed in Norfolk, Virginia, and served on an Arleigh Burke-class Destroyer. I returned to Bethlehem in 2017 and am now a full-time student at NCC majoring in Global Studies with a concentration in Environmental Studies. Since my time in service, I have become an environmental advocate and a non-profit organizer.*

Residents are welcome to fashion reflections on candidate comments, sending them to ejg1@lehigh.edu. On Gadfly we seek the good conversation that builds community, so please be courteous at all times. Gadfly retains the right to abridge and to edit your reflections and to decline posts that are repetitive or that contain personal attacks. Gadfly will publish resident reflections on the week's Forum at noon on Friday.

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