

Peter reflects on Gadfly's reflections

The Bethlehem Gadfly George Floyd killing, Police August 5, 2020

 Latest in a series of posts responding to the George Floyd killing 

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.

ref: **Reflecting on the discussion at Allentown City Council July 29**

Gadfly,

I agree with many of the points you make in this post, but in almost every case, something niggles at me. Here is a copy with replies inserted after each numbered paragraph.

1) We don't want to see the breakdown that yesterday's posts show within the Allentown City Council. Difference of opinion, yes, ok, but not a breakdown in civility or respect or cooperation. Please.

- Sometimes it's better if we know what people really think.

2) We have not had a recent police incident like the Allentown Sacred Heart incident to flare passions and to foster stand-taking. Gadfly wonders if our Bethlehem discussion of police policy and practice therefore will have only an "academic" feel to it. Where will deep motivation for change in Bethlehem — if, in fact, change is desired — come from? Can tragic cases elsewhere — nationally — do that? Can fear of tragic cases here do that? Or is there a history of troublesome incidents in Bethlehem of which the public is not generally aware?

- We should be just as able to learn from the experience of others and incidents in other places & other times. We don't have to directly experience something to learn from it — if we did, that would prove that the entire education system, from pre-K to PhD is deeply flawed. (Of course, it may be flawed for unrelated reasons.)

3) Bethlehem proponents of specific changes in police policies and practices are liable to find, as Allentown did, that either what they want is already “on the books” or is controlled by state law or Human Resources/personnel policies or Union collective bargaining contracts. Quick change in specific policies and practices — maybe even any change — in many cases is not possible. Gadfly felt that such reality severely deflated the Allentown reform position as parts of the resolution were taken up by the Allentown Council and dismissed. It almost felt sometimes that not enough homework was done.

- Telling citizens that something is already taken care of or can't be changed is standard operating procedure whenever the status quo is challenged, and that's just more proof of how deeply embedded the problems are. Never accept such statements at face value.

4) We need someone to compare the “8 Can't Wait” list with our police department regs. A match or not?

- As I mentioned on another post, **8Can'tWait** has some very solid points, but it also misses some things [tear gas & other ‘crowd control’ methods, for example] Anyway, it seems to be morphing into **8toAbolition**.

5) The Allentown Chief entertained the possibility of a citizen “advisory” group — interestingly, we may have just gotten one in the Community Advisory Board in which we participate with the NAACP. Its specific role still needs more explanation. Gadfly is not sure that reform voices from such groups as Black Lives Matter or Lehigh Valley Stands Up are on that

Board, though. And, if not, how useful will that Board be? That Board has to hear challenging views.

- Most citizen advisory groups have little power to actually do something about problems in enforcement, but they're a great way to defuse an angry public. And the NAACP group should not be co-opted into focusing on only limited concerns with limited options for action.

6) For Big Picture discussion, “defunding the police” is an unfortunate phrase for the general public. Gadfly, of course, is not the first to say that.

- It's much better than the phrase it has largely displaced [abolish the police], and even if it is incomplete, it certainly conveys the message about removing funds from policing to build more programs for prevention. (In general, such programs save far more than they cost.)

7) For Big Picture discussion, “systemic racism” is an unfortunately vague term for the general public. Gadfly, of course, is not the first to say that either.

- It's not at all ‘vague’; it's just dealing with a large, many-faceted topic — clearly a Big Picture topic

8) But it's easy to see the result of that lack of understanding in the incredulity about both terms by many voices on the Next Door blog, using that blog as a snapshot of mainstream resident thinking.

- Yes, there's a huge lack of understanding!

9) Proponents of change in Bethlehem such as the ones who personally attended our July 7 Council meeting and who probably will be present August 11 assume an understanding of “defunding the police” and “systemic racism” that the voices on the Next Door blog, for instance, pretty much totally lack — and the proponents of change sometimes

unfortunately if understandably speak in terms of “demands.” Which feels rhetorically and strategically unwise to Gadfly.

- The lack of understanding is a huge problem. After hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets in cities across the country, though, perhaps the blissfully ignorant could take it upon themselves to learn what these terms really mean.

10) Proponents of change in Bethlehem who want (need) general public support have a big hill to climb, much groundwork to lay, a significant good-faith educational task to perform. Again, representative mainstream resident voices on the Next Door blog either didn't understand what defunding the police means or immediately saw it as disastrous. They could not “picture” it.

11) It's up to the proponents of change in Bethlehem to patiently help mainstream residents “picture” it.

- About #10 and #11 — Again, after hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets in cities across the country, it seems inappropriate to suggest that it is on the victims to educate the people who keep the system the way it is.

12) 2/3's or more of the Allentown population are People of Color. They don't need the terms explained. Systemic racism is their felt reality. They were pounding on the outside walls of Council chambers while inside the Allentown Council deflated the resolution as if they and that practice didn't exist. We don't have the pressure from those numbers here. In Bethlehem, less than 10% of the population is Black (for historical reasons as Councilman Reynolds has interestingly explained) and the roughly 30% Latino population (as suggested by Councilwoman Negrón last Council meeting) are quiet (silenced?) perhaps because they fear reprisal. The 60% white population has no felt reality to associate with the terms and thus needs to be educated.

- Again, this seems to imply that we can't learn from incidents in other places or other times to inform our own actions.

13) When it came to the major, overarching issue of defunding or divesting the police, Gadfly feels the Allentown proponents of change got completely steamrolled. They did not even try to respond (maybe they were consciously being quiet??? Gadfly is no strategist). They did not have an answer for basic objections to defunding/divestment and for commonsense questions about defunding/divestment. Gadfly himself could not have voted to further examine the possibility of defunding the police on the basis of anything they said. No case was made.

- I suspect that the two members under attack did not see any point in trying to respond to the hostility displayed by Council President Hendricks and that crew.

14) Who will write the answer to the Allentown Chief who says his budget has been cut, but he is still operating underbudget, in a fiscally responsible way; who says his force is down 20% or whatever from a few years ago, yet they are out there 24/7 during a pandemic risking their lives for us; who says that to cut the force even more at this moment would negate recent hard-gotten gains in minority recruiting; who says that domestic violence calls are among the most dangerous of all and no place for a social worker; and who says that it would make no sense to sacrifice training to the budget knife. Who does the math and tells the Chief what we're going to cut from his budget and then where we're putting that money — and, most importantly, how public safety will be thereby improved? Nobody has yet shown that defunding is, indeed, reasonably possible. Needs to happen.

- It would help people assess the possibilities if the police [in Allentown and Bethlehem] presented a clear picture of costs. One big factor is actual pay earned by police officers, including overtime, so that should

be made clear. (In some cases, cities have spent so much on overtime that they could easily have hired additional personnel.)

15) Gadfly knows many of you follow Bernie O'Hare's Lehigh Valley Ramblings blog, and Bernie had an **"Allentown's Real Heroes"** post there yesterday morning that's on point here. Nobody yet that Gadfly sees is writing the response to the kind of tack Bernie takes there. And that is what's needed if the defunding reform gains any traction.

- The blog post in question qualifies as a rant. While Borrero was no upstanding citizen, that didn't mean the policeman had to kneel on his neck, a method that I understand is specifically prohibited by APD policy. The officers present could have handled the situation better.

16) Gadfly perked up at this statement by the Allentown Chief. He said, if we are going to make changes, let's do it right, let's take time, let's partner with somebody to do research, let's find a model plan right for Allentown. Plans specifically at Eugene, Oregon, and St. Petersburg, Florida, were mentioned, but perhaps as inapplicable to Allentown. But if one is trying to gain support for defunding, for shaping new visions of public safety, why are some concrete examples of explorations and experiments elsewhere not brought forward to help break the death grip of the status quo. People on and off the Head Table need a "picture" . . . need a vision. Leadership creates visions. (The pending research report on local policing by Lehigh's Prof Holona Ochs promises to be relevant here.)

- I welcome the Chief's statement.

17) Gadfly still doesn't have a good answer to such questions he has been posing lately like do "we" have a beef with the department? Has trust between police and community broken down in Bethlehem or in some parts of Bethlehem? Is reform urgently needed here? It seems like the Minneapolis police department of the Floyd case has a history of trouble and controversy. That department needs to be fixed. Allentown may have

that kind of history too. Are we in that position? Or are we thinking that this cultural moment of national conversation presents us with a valuable opportunity to rethink how we do the public safety business and explore other options?

- There are still many unanswered questions about policing in Bethlehem and other cities and towns in the Lehigh Valley. There are clear cases of racial bias and of excessive force. There are cases, here and elsewhere, where police officers do not follow the rules. (As in Minneapolis, where the man who killed George Floyd was not only violating department policy, he was violating the law when he murdered Floyd.)