

Allentown “defunders” vote against adding officers

The Bethlehem Gadfly George Floyd killing October 10, 2020

 *Latest in a series of posts in the wake of the George Floyd murder* 

Gadfly, as usual, keeping an eye on what’s happening around us. Gerlach and Siegel would be called “defunders.” A time of extensive retirements would be a good time to think about “re-imagining.” We have had no discussion of policing, at least visible to the public, since August 11, the public meeting about which there has still been no official feedback. Gadfly has not sensed any push for defunding/re-imagining here.

Selections from Andrew Wagaman, “With two City Council members objecting, Allentown hires 11 police officers ahead of expected retirement wave.” Morning Call, October 10, 2020.

Allentown hired 11 police officers this week, and some officials hope to bring more on board in anticipation of a looming retirement wave.

City Council voted 5-2 on Wednesday to bring on 11 patrolmen at a starting salary of \$60,807 each. Joshua Siegel and Ce-Ce Gerlach, who voted no, argued that the action is fiscally irresponsible and runs counter to their goal of re-imagining the city’s public safety initiatives.

The recruitment class will, at least temporarily, bring the police department up to full staff (222 officers) for the first time in several years, city police Chief Glenn Granitz Jr. said. It will also enable the department to tap a 3-year-old, \$750,000 federal grant to hire six additional officers specifically for community policing.

“We have made it a priority to utilize this grant in order to again attain actual community policing in Allentown,” Granitz said Friday.

The department will be recruiting intensely for a while. Thirty officers are eligible to retire with a pension at the end of this year, and another 40 will become eligible by the end of 2021, when Allentown’s police contract also happens to expire.

Council President Daryl Hendricks, a former Allentown police captain, said he expects at least 11 officers to retire by the end of the year, and fears another 30 or more will choose to retire by the end of 2021. He blamed it on a nationwide “climate of negativity toward police.”

“Many people say to me, ‘I don’t understand why anyone would want to be a police officer anymore,’” Hendricks said. “Unfortunately, many people in our ranks across the country feel that way, too, and the first opportunity they get to retire, they are doing so.”

City Council passed a bill earlier this year that allowed the police department to actively recruit previously certified officers who do not have to attend the city police academy, cutting about eight months of training before they can hit the streets.

The department’s existing hiring process meet the standards outlined in a recently passed state bill related to background checks. The bill requires police departments to disclose to other departments their officers’ employment histories, including disciplinary actions, complaints and reasons for separation, if applicable.

Gerlach said she voted against the additional police hires because it came less than two weeks before City Council and Mayor Ray O’Connell’s administration commence 2021 budget negotiations.

During those negotiations, Gerlach vowed to pursue “budgetary, policy and protocol changes” within the department establishing a “more holistic approach” to public safety. This includes reallocating some police budget toward funding other professionals who Gerlach believes would be better suited to handle “social service calls” related to mental health incidents, drug and alcohol abuse, and homelessness issues.

“I think a more appropriate time to discuss items with large budgetary impacts is during the budget season,” she said. “We need to prevent crime, which means investments in education, housing and employment opportunities.”

Dismissing community policing as a “buzzword,” Siegel said he doesn’t believe simply increasing the presence of police in a given neighborhood will prevent crime or even lead to more crimes being solved. The city, he

said, should instead focus on addressing the social inequities that actually drive crime — like a lack of affordable housing, treatment services and recreational opportunities for youth.

[Gerlach and Siegel] also introduced a resolution calling for [a slew of police reforms](#), including departmental funding cuts, reflecting a nationwide debate following George Floyd's death at the hands of police in May.