

The budget dance (3): the pedestrian/bicycle bridge

The Bethlehem Gadfly Budget, Pedestrian bridge November 24, 2020

 *Latest in a series of posts on the pedestrian bridge* 

City Council, November 17, 2020 video

begin min. 2:06:01

Budget Hearing, November 19, 2020 video

begin min. 36:40

Pedestrian/bicycle bridge feasibility study

Funding sources: DCNR grant \$40,000; Northampton County grant \$60,000; City funds \$40,000 = \$140,000

The third element in the budget dance so far this year is \$40,000 to fund a feasibility study for a pedestrian/bicycle bridge across the Lehigh River. (Click **“pedestrian bridge”** under Topics on the sidebar)

The idea for this pedestrian/bicycle bridge germinated several years ago and the process marked a key moment a year or two ago when \$40,000 of City money was approved to join with state and county grants as indicated above to fund a feasibility study.

The City’s \$40,000 was approved by Council in last year’s budget, and it came before Council last Tuesday night November 17 in what normally

would be a routine approval of a contract with the firm selected by a City committee to do the study.

However, Councilman Callahan strongly objected to approving these funds, which led to as vigorous a Council interchange as Gadfly has witnessed in recent months between especially Councilman Callahan and Councilman Reynolds.

In brief, Councilman Callahan — reminding us that he was for the bridge project and voted for the study in better financial times — argued that this “bridge to nowhere” was a “luxury” when we already had ample and, in fact, underused pedestrian/bicycle access across the river, when we are in the midst of a pandemic, when businesses are suffering, when citizens are scrambling financially, when City revenue is down, when the City faces increased pension contributions, when we couldn’t afford the cost of a bridge anyway, and, perhaps most significantly, when we are cutting crucial City personnel (e.g., firefighters) and when we are raising taxes.

Other Councilpersons but especially Councilman Reynolds argued, among other things, that the bridge is an economic engine, that this is a different vision for the city, something to make us special, another brand for the City, one like others in which functionality is not the key element, something that has been in process for years, something in which a large number of residents have been creatively proactive and whose dedication needs to be affirmed, a project that has attracted state and county support, that has generated huge support from private citizens, City organizations, and the business community itself, a project, which if pursued after the feasibility study would not be paid for with City funds, a project whose funding was in the Capital part of the budget not the General fund, so that the money could not be used for salaries to save positions as Councilman Callahan would want.

Councilwoman Crampsie Smith — liking the project but feeling the pain of the pandemic — made a motion to table the proposal, but that failed 5-2.

Councilmen Callahan and Reynolds went back and forth, like two rams with locked horns.

It got testy. Councilman Callahan asking how often Councilman Reynolds voted to raise taxes. Councilman Reynolds asking that the record show that he was laughing at Councilman Callahan.

Councilman Callahan climactically turning, in effect, to the audience asking all who supported his view to send their comments to the City Clerk.

Council eventually voted 6-1 to approve the contract for the feasibility study.

Councilman Callahan was not deterred, however.

Learning that the \$40,000 could be transferred to other uses in the Capital budget, at the November 19 budget hearing he quizzed Public Works director Alkhal about other possible uses for the money, seeming to settle on the fact that \$40,000 would pay for ADA disability ramps at two intersections.

And will propose an amendment to that effect at the final budget deliberations.

That's where we stand right now.

Followers will remember that one of the goals of the Gadfly project is to help you know your elected officials as well as possible so that you can make the most informed choices possible next time you vote.

Councilman Callahan is up for Council again in the May primary. And 'tis said that both Councilmen Callahan and Reynolds may run for Mayor.

So Gadfly is putting together some audio clips for you to hear. In the meantime, there are links to the meeting videos at the top of the page.

The Bethlehem Gadfly