



Bethlehem's Year of Floyd (4): The Community Engagement Initiative

The Bethlehem Gadfly George Floyd anniversary May 13, 2021

 *Latest in a series of posts regarding the George Floyd anniversary* 

Gadfly is modestly proposing that City Council mark the anniversary of George Floyd's death at a Public Safety meeting on May 25, 2021. A year gives us some distance on our efforts to act on the significance of his death and a perspective on the challenges it presented to the City. Gadfly continues here a quasi-history of the "Year of Floyd" as seen through his eyes and the pages of the blog. One man's version. As always, Gadfly invites you to join in.

The Community Engagement Initiative is a wonderful idea.

Gadfly called it "audaciously ambitious."

The CEI sponsored by Councilmembers Reynolds and Crampsie Smith generated the most powerful rhetoric of the past year or even of any year.

It was rhetoric that matched the dark profundity of the Floyd killing. It challenged us in a particularly American way to weld together, renew our dream of democratic community, and take positive action.

Listen to Councilman Reynolds [here](#) at the June 16 Council meeting, for instance, in one of the first articulations of the nature and goals of the CEI: the people need a consistent public space for our different community groups to discuss and take action on systemic racism, discrimination, social justice, allocation of resources within the police department, he said.

How about that very next Council meeting, July 7, when the resolution to form the CEI was up for a vote? The community was indeed engaged. Though we were in the pandemic, a handful of honest-to-god real [activists](#) were in Town Hall with Councilman Reynolds and

President Waldron while the rest of us were in television land. And they were not happy. They were broiling for action, action of another sort. They called for defunding and dismantling the police. They saw the CEI as appeasement, as pacification, as a public relations ploy, as a band-aid, as a joke. They saw the proposed community discussions as belated — the conversation had been going on for years but no one (read elected officials) was listening. The CEI to them meant more cop-sponsored pizza parties. They complained of lack of representation by people of color.

The response from the ten or so **callers** on that July 7 to the idea of a CEI was not a helluva lot better than that of the activists. The **reporter** who covered the meeting, in fact, described the public response as “lukewarm at best.” The absolutely most memorable call, however, was **Anna Smith’s**, and her words that “we have an opportunity to do something truly momentous” became Gadfly’s anthem, perfectly capturing the spirit of radiant optimism that informed the conception of the CEI: “I’m here because I believe that we are at an important moment in our community’s history, and we have an opportunity to do something truly momentous. But unless we focus on doing it the right way—by relying on experts in our community to provide advice, supporting community members with deep neighborhood ties to lead the charge, and taking the time to build relationships not with other organizations or the usual suspects, but with the very folks that are marginalized—then we are doomed to another series of community meetings where the same folks talk, the same folks listen, and nothing changes.”

This was not to be a moment of the same old, same old. What Gadfly heard in the Reynolds words and the Smith words was the goal of change, productive change, radical change, transformative change.

So Councilman Reynolds, undaunted, sat in Town Hall July 7 face-to-face with the activists and gave an **enthraling description** of the CEI: he was looking to found an open public structure in which the energy of the demonstrations would continue. The CEI would be open-ended; “we” weren’t going to set the agenda. The goal was to create public pressure to bring about real change. The goal was to give people who have ideas about what we need to do access to power and a voice to wield it. CEI co-

sponsor Councilwoman Crampsie Smith added a sincere, powerful pledge of complete commitment to the high goals of the CEI: “we can work together to try to make changes . . . in all areas. Even though I do have white privilege, I have, and I will continue to advocate for people of color, people living in poverty, people who have mental illness, addictions, you name it, I will continue to advocate till the day I die.” We who know the Councilwoman believe it.

The resolution to establish the CEI passed 7-0 at that July 7 City Council meeting. We expected things to start percolating immediately. But the oxygen was seemingly taken out of the CEI thrust by the announcement of a Public Safety meeting for August 11. Discussion of public safety and of the creation of a CEI were married from the beginning in the **June 9 letter** from Councilmembers Reynolds and Crampsie Smith to the mayor and police chief, but they are really two different tracks. Discussion of the police went first at the marathon August 11 Public Safety meeting, but time was given to the CEI at the end. It was at this August 11 Public Safety Committee meeting that **Councilman Reynolds** gave his fullest and most vigorous explanation of the CEI. You must **listen**. Here’s Gadfly’s response to the Councilman’s words: “Councilman Reynolds is at his rousing best here. Worth listening and catching his energy and enthusiasm. ‘That was beautiful,’ said Councilwoman Negron of his words, ‘you get it!’ Community engagement is, of course, synonymous with Gadfly’s mission. The Reynolds/Crampsie Smith Community Engagement Initiative is audaciously ambitious. Catch the wave!” It is in this speech that Councilman Reynolds said that Black and Brown lives matter, that systemic racism is real, it’s the speech where he envisioned two types of regular CEI meetings, meetings that would be advertised on the City web site, meetings organized by the City and meetings organized by community groups and organizations, a speech in which he said (good god! did he really say this! Is Gadfly the only one who heard it?), “I think we do have an opportunity in the coming weeks and months to make tangible progress on ending systemic racism and creating more equitable systems.”

Oh, only tangible progress on ending systemic racism and creating more equitable systems.

A cultural moment in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, the Christmas City when in Smith-speech we have an opportunity to do something truly momentous.

A goal to make your temples throb, your palms sweat, and your loins leap.



Gadfly began to think not only of a **new brand** for Bethlehem but a new reality.

George Floyd's death, **Gadfly wrote**, "put a fire in Councilman Reynolds' belly."

Gadfly became a Reynolds groupie.

Gadfly waited for the wave.

But that was August 11.

Later in the year Gadfly titled a post "looking for the wave."

As far as Gadfly can see (what is he missing?), the CEI has disappeared from our radar screens and our vocabulary.

Gadfly is just not sure what happened to it; Gadfly is just not sure where that energy, idealism, and rhetorical force went.

Systemic racism is still here.

Was it the pandemic? The DiLuzio fiasco? The noise generated by the Lehigh Valley Good Neighbors Alliance? What?

What was it?

Gadfly can't remember hearing the phrase "Community Engagement Initiative" anymore.

He misses it.

He's afraid the momentum, the wave has passed.

If we have that meeting on May 25 to mark the anniversary of George Floyd's death, maybe we could assess what happened, recalibrate, and resume the journey to the Equitable City once more.

Maybe.

to be continued . . .