

The Bethlehem Press interview with Chief Kott

The Bethlehem Gadfly Police February 10, 2021

 *Latest in a series of posts about the Bethlehem Police* 

In this interview with the Bethlehem Press, Gadfly is especially interested in Chief Kott's mention of collaboration with the Health Bureau. He also notes her mention of membership on the Community Advisory Board and a LGBTQ subcommittee of a community engagement board. Gadfly knows about the CAB, formed early by/with the NAACP after George Floyd. But what is the community engagement board? Is that something out of the Reynolds/Crampsie Smith resolution for a Community Engagement Initiative? Gadfly has heard nothing about the CEI for a long time. And there never has been, as far as he knows, any public information about what the CAB is doing. So we have no information upon which to judge these initiatives. And he thinks we would like to hear substantially more.

The Chief's idea of a public information officer is interesting.

This is a good time for the periodic Gadfly reminder to subscribe to the Bethlehem Press so that we can continue to have and even expand community news.

selections from "Nate Jastrzemski, "It can't just be one person at the top' Police chief details department's projects, upcoming goals." Bethlehem Press, February 9, 2021.

In regard to policing the city, 2020 has been an extremely weird year," said Bethlehem Police Chief Michelle Kott during her first interview with the Press since taking command in October. "It's been odd because not as many people have been out. Obviously we didn't have Musikfest, Celticfest, all the other festivals and events that we have in the city that bring hundreds of thousands of people a year.

"Our officers are not having as many citizen contacts as we normally would ... however, for 2020 we responded to 225-250 medical calls involving COVID-positive patients"

Kott emphasized, as she did during her nomination and confirmation, that community engagement is imperative for the department to build and maintain a trusting relationship with the public. Whether face-to-face, Zoom or other virtual platforms, police are reaching out as often and safely as possible.

Additionally, the department is collaborating with the Health Bureau to help residents that officers come into contact with to get in touch with resources and services that could potentially prevent future police contact or help them navigate an issue they are facing, whether food insecurity, homelessness, mental health issues or substance abuse. Kott would like to expand this relationship long-term, as it helps everyone involved.

Social work is particularly important now, Kott said, as we grapple with the ramifications of prolonged quarantine. “I think this is going to require communities to come together and put people in touch with services to help them get through this hard time.”

As for the department, Kott was upbeat. “I’m very, very pleased and happy with the teamwork and the collaborative efforts ... all the way down to the officers, to work together to provide the best level of service to the community,” she said, adding a key component to the cohesion she seeks is working with supervisors regularly, rather than delegating from on high.

That is partially because she worries about losing institutional memory due to longtime officer retirements. Young officers have a lot of enthusiasm, Kott said, but it’s hard to make up for a loss of decades of experience. Thus, she is focusing on recruitment and mentorships and how they might also benefit through broadened community relations.

“We need to get information out to the citizens so they’re better informed about what’s going on in their communities and I think a valuable way to do that is to have a central contact, like a public information officer.”

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Lack of a modern public facility notwithstanding, Kott succinctly summarized her holistic approach to policing and community, evident throughout the interview, by declaring with purpose and certainty, "Everybody wins if we work together."