

BETHLEHEM CITY COUNCIL MEETING
10 East Church Street - Town Hall
Bethlehem, Pennsylvania
Tuesday, January 21, 2025 – 7:00 PM

PLEDGE TO THE FLAG

1. ROLL CALL

The meeting was called to order by President Colón. Present were Bryan G. Callahan, Hillary G. Kwiatek, Colleen Laird, Rachel Leon, and Michael G. Colón, 5; absent were Grace Crampsie Smith and Kiera Wilhelm, 2. President Colón advised that Ms. Crampsie Smith is traveling, and Ms. Wilhelm is ill this evening. Mayor Reynolds also is not attending because he is working to learn the consequences of the executive orders issued yesterday by the Trump Administration. He is trying to get answers on how these may affect some of the funding sources for the City.

2. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

January 7, 2025

3. PUBLIC COMMENT

A. PUBLIC COMMENT (on any subject not being voted on this evening – 5 Minute Time Limit)

Speak Out

Resident Harry Faber urged Council not to “cash in on” their credentials and “live the comfy lifestyle” but to follow in the footsteps of revolutionaries who came before them and risk their own quality of life. He said change can start anywhere. He urged Council members to start speaking out against genocide in the Middle East and to lead the way for other cities to follow.

Eager to See Study Results

Robert Dandi of REMAX Real Estate noted the housing crisis in the Lehigh Valley. Given the housing shortage, he was pleased to see Council entertain potential changes to zoning rules to accommodate housing types including in-law suites, apartments and accessory dwelling units. He wondered about the status of the study that was being commissioned in late 2024. He would be interested in the results.

President Colón said Director of Community and Economic Development Laura Collins is present. This matter also might be addressed during New Business.

Taxed/Immigration

Resident Mary Jo Makoul discussed two increases felt by taxpayers in 2024: a 2.6 percent real estate tax and an 8 percent increase in water and sewer fees. These increases are a challenge

for her and many other residents to pay. She recommended more strongly considering cutting expenses before raising taxes. Ms. Makoul also noted that Allentown is considering obtaining sanctuary city status. She said her relatives immigrated to the United States 125 years ago and came through Ellis Island, following strict laws and procedures in order to enter. She hoped that Bethlehem would not take these laws lightly either if ordinances such as sanctuary city status are proposed.

Opposes Woolworth's Redevelopment Plan

Resident William Scheirer referred to a proposal to build apartments at the former Woolworth Building on Main Street. He noted that the replacement for the Walnut Street Garage is being built smaller than the original facility despite many apartments in the proposal or construction phase. This is not good planning. Architecturally, he admitted the Woolworth Building looks plain. But he said this represents a period in American history, and he encouraged Council not to lose this history the way so much has been lost on the South Side. Mr. Scheirer also objected to the height of the building, believing it will set a precedent for other developers to propose tall buildings in this neighborhood. He encouraged Council to follow the recommendation of the Historical Architectural Review Board and deny a Certificate of Appropriateness for 555 Main Street when this matter is considered.

'Welcoming Policies'/Investments Studied

Resident Valerie Noonan wanted to correct misinformation. She said her great-grandfather immigrated to the United States. She said his immigration information was minimal and his documentation consists of a single line on one piece of paper. The "welcoming policies" of some sanctuary cities and counties alluded to earlier are responsive as a policy of seeing the federal government taking measures to "kick out people that have done the work to be here" and that these cities and counties do not agree and will not collaborate. She would support Bethlehem doing so. Ms. Noonan also said she filed a Right-to-Know request involving the City's pension investments. There are "significant amounts of investments in companies supporting the genocide in Gaza." She shared this information with some City Council members, but has learned that Council does not have direct oversight in pension matters. This is more in the hands of boards representing the bargaining units for City employees.

- B. PUBLIC COMMENT (on ordinances and resolutions to be voted on by Council this evening – 5 Minute Time Limit.

Who Are the Principals?

Resident William Scheirer asked if anyone knew the principal owners of Traffic Planning and Design, Inc., which is under consideration for a contract award under Item 10A on tonight's agenda.

President Colón said that question may be answered when the matter is considered later in the meeting.

4. OLD BUSINESS

- A. Members of Council
- B. Tabled Items
- C. Unfinished Business

5. NEW BUSINESS

Mr. Callahan

Mr. Callahan wanted to take advantage of a light agenda to discuss a few matters he has been considering. He said a visitor on Main Street asked him about public restrooms.

Ms. Collins believed there are none in the downtown area on Main Street.

Mr. Callahan said businesses generally limit the use of their restrooms to patrons only. He believes that with the rebuilding of the Walnut Street Garage, now would be the time to offer public restrooms given existing tourism and the expectation of many additional visitors with the newly-awarded World Heritage designation. Restrooms should be provided somewhere. These conversations have been had before, and nothing has been done. He also wondered whether restrooms are offered on the South Side.

Ms. Collins did not believe so.

President Colón believed that the Visitor's Center on Main Street at least used to offer a public restroom. He did not know if this was still the case, and he recognized that the facility had set hours of operation.

Mr. Callahan said he was not finding fault. He just believed it was past time to offer such accommodations. With 100,000 more people estimated to visit because of World Heritage, he said the time to act is now. Mr. Callahan recognized that a change order would be required to add these facilities to the parking garage project, but he believed it is necessary. There should be, at minimum, one male and one female bathroom in both the Historic District and on the South Side. He suggested speaking to Mayor Reynolds to see what could be done.

Ms. Collins knows this is an issue and has had conversations about it. Possibilities have included placing restrooms in a redesigned Sun Inn Courtyard for example. More conversations can be had.

Mr. Callahan encouraged future discussion.

Mr. Callahan also has heard from three business owners that they were offered free condoms and dispensers by the City. He wanted to know the background.

Ms. Collins said she believed this was a Health Bureau initiative.

Mr. Callahan asked whether this funding was grant supported. He hoped no City money was being spent.

Ms. Collins said she would check with Health Director Kristen Wenrich. She added that the Health Bureau is almost entirely funded by grants.

Mr. Callahan said that even if this initiative was grant funded, he hoped this money could be used differently to help local businesses instead of paying for condoms and dispensers.

Mr. Callahan said he also appreciated Ms. Makoul's comments on taxes. Any time that taxes are raised, it makes this city more unaffordable for people of low- and moderate-income housing. There is no good year to raise taxes. Council should be looking for ways to cut expenses.

Ms. Kwiatek

Ms. Kwiatek favored providing public restrooms if a way can be found to build them. This costs money as do security and maintenance. There are a lot of related issues to be examined. She also favored the Health Bureau making condoms available and referred to the AIDS crisis. Ms. Kwiatek also supported last year's real estate tax increase in part due to collective bargaining increases for police and firefighters. She believed the tax increase was the responsible thing to do to maintain services.

Ms. Laird

Ms. Laird followed up on Mr. Scheirer's question about the principal owners involved in Traffic Planning and Design and whether any are known to the City.

Public Works Director Michael Alkhal said that none of the names stands out, but the information is available to the public if anyone wants it. The standard contract selection process was followed.

Ms. Laird also asked whether the restrooms in City Hall and the Library are available to the general public. She was told yes.

Ms. Leon

Ms. Leon asked for an update involving the zoning study that was mentioned by Mr. Dandi. She wondered if there was an update or if we should simply refer those curious to the City's website under the comprehensive study.

Ms. Collins said the City's website is a good source as is the We Build Bethlehem website where updates can be found on housing. She said the contract for the study was approved by Council. DCED is going through the contracting process with the bidder and the Law Bureau. Once finalized, it will take about a year to conduct the study and receive results. A steering committee will meet quarterly on accessory dwelling units. She said she can have Deputy Director of Community Development Sara Satullo provide updates to Council.

Ms. Leon also reminded that portable bathrooms were placed on the Greenway in support of events conducted by the SouthSide Arts District. There was discussion held by the Public and Greenspace Committee suggesting a nonpermanent structure within a permanent structure, something that is easy to take out and clean. This is a type of restroom used in some other cities.

She believed during that meeting that Mayor Reynolds was curious as to whether this could work elsewhere in the City. This might be worth discussing again. She said it was inexpensive.

Mr. Alkhal added that there are public bathrooms in the Lehigh and Northampton Transportation Authority bus stop on Guetter Street.

Mr. Callahan suggested erecting signs to better notify the public.

Mr. Callahan returned to the subject of the 2024 tax increase. Council in 2023 voted to raise taxes at a time when Mayor Reynolds was quoted as saying that the City was in the best financial shape ever. Mr. Callahan also said the City was sitting on millions of dollars of federal money to recover from the pandemic.

Ms. Kwiatek asked Ms. Collins if the pandemic money had restrictions rather than being available for Council's use at-will.

Ms. Collins said there were specific purposes and restrictions but deferred to Business Administrator Eric Evans to explain.

Mr. Evans said there were strong restrictions and recommendations from the federal government and agencies that were looked to for advice. That advice was that these were one-time funds and should not be used to plug budget holes. This money was not to be used to replace sustainable revenue that should come in every year. Mr. Evans further explained that the City has increased expenses in that it is aggressively paying down debt, paying increased salaries along with benefits and pensions, and paying increased costs for materials such as water treatment chemicals.

Mr. Callahan recognized that some of the pandemic money had restrictions, but he believed several million dollars was spent from pandemic money on line items that the City normally pays from other sources.

Mr. Evans agreed that was true but said this was done in capital money, not the operating budget.

Mr. Callahan said this would reflect savings.

Mr. Evans additionally explained that some of the pandemic money was allocated into the Capital Budget. This alleviated the need for a borrowing that would have added to the City's debt service. This saved the cost of paying interest over 15 years or so. The City is well leveraged for the future and it does not want to return to a less healthy financial state.

Mr. Colón

President Colón reminded that these budget concerns are an important reason to attend the budget sessions each November and December when these matters are discussed and decisions made.

6. COMMUNICATIONS

A. *Director of Public Works – 2024 08 Broad St Corridor Improvements – Traffic Planning and Design*

The Clerk read a January 13, 2025 memorandum and proposed Resolution from Michael Alkhal, Director of Public Works. Mr. Alkhal recommends a contract with Traffic Planning and Design, Inc. of Bethlehem. The consultant will provide engineering design, permitting, and limited construction oversight for the Broad Street Corridor Improvements Project. The cost is \$977,318. The completion deadline is December 31, 2029. There are no renewals.

President Colón stated that Resolution 10 A is on the agenda.

B. *Deputy Controller – Memo – Records Destruction*

The Clerk read a January 2, 2025 memorandum and proposed Resolution from Michele Liberto, Deputy Controller, requesting the Destruction of Records from the Controller's Office. Ms. Liberto has reviewed the Municipal Records Retention Act, and the records listed on the exhibit accompanying the memo fall within the categories where destruction is permitted.

President Colón stated that a Resolution will be placed on the February 4 Council agenda.

7. REPORTS

A. *President of Council*

In Ms. Cramspie Smith's absence, President Colón announced that a Finance Committee meeting has been scheduled for 6 PM on February 4 to discuss year-end budget adjustments and budget additions.

President Colón also announced that the Community Development Committee meeting that was scheduled for 6 PM today was postponed because of some unforeseen absences. This meeting to discuss proposed amendments to the Residential Permit Parking program will be rescheduled and the time and date announced.

B. *Mayor*

7B1. Administrative Order No. 2025-02 – Lee D. Cunningham – Codes Board of Appeals

Mr. Evans presented Mayor Reynolds' proposed reappointment of Lee D. Cunningham to the Codes Board of Appeals. The reappointment is effective through January of 2026. Ms. Wilhelm and Ms. Leon sponsored Resolution 2025-012 to confirm the reappointment.

Voting AYE: Ms. Laird, Ms. Leon, Mr. Callahan, Ms. Kwiatek, and Mr. Colón, 5. The Motion passed.

8. ORDINANCES FOR FINAL PASSAGE

None.

9. NEW ORDINANCES

None.

10. RESOLUTIONS

A. *Approve Resolution – 2024 08 Broad St Corridor Improvements – Traffic Planning and Design, Inc.*

Ms. Wilhelm and Ms. Leon sponsored Resolution No. 2025-013 that authorized to execute all documents and agreements with Traffic Planning and Design, Inc. to provide engineering services, obtain permits, and provide limited construction oversight for the Broad Street Corridor Improvements Project.

Voting AYE: Ms. Laird, Ms. Leon, Mr. Callahan, Ms. Kwiatek, and Mr. Colón, 5. The Resolution passed.

B. *Approve Resolution – Health – Records Destruction*

Ms. Wilhelm and Ms. Leon sponsored Resolution No. 2025-014 that authorized to the disposal of public records in the Health Bureau, as set forth in Exhibit A.

Voting AYE: Ms. Laird, Ms. Leon, Mr. Callahan, Ms. Kwiatek, and Mr. Colón, 5. The Resolution passed.

President Colón stated that he would accept a motion and a second to consider Resolutions 10 C through 10 E as a group. Ms. Laird made a motion, seconded by Ms. Leon, to consider Resolutions 10 C through 10 E as a group.

Voting AYE: Ms. Laird, Ms. Leon, Mr. Callahan, Ms. Kwiatek, and Mr. Colón, 5. The Resolution passed.

C. *Approve Resolution – HARB – 476 North New Street – January 2025*

Ms. Wilhelm and Ms. Leon sponsored Resolution No. 2025-015 that authorized to replace wood siding around the entire house, repaint the house, and restore the porch that faces North New Street.

Voting AYE: Ms. Laird, Ms. Leon, Mr. Callahan, Ms. Kwiatek, and Mr. Colón, 5. The Resolution passed.

D. Certificate of Appropriateness – HARB – 79 West Market Street – January 2025

Ms. Wilhelm and Ms. Leon sponsored Resolution No. 2025-016 that authorized to install a 24-inch diameter, double sided, sign with the text “Glow By Laser” attached to a scroll bracket.

Voting AYE: Ms. Laird, Ms. Leon, Mr. Callahan, Ms. Kwiatek, and Mr. Colón, 5. The Resolution passed.

E. Certificate of Appropriateness – HARB – 233 East Church Street – January 2025

Ms. Wilhelm and Ms. Leon sponsored Resolution No. 2025-017 that authorized to remove a decaying patio roof and replace it with a freestanding second floor deck in the same footprint as the existing patio roof.

Voting AYE: Ms. Laird, Ms. Leon, Mr. Callahan, Ms. Kwiatek, and Mr. Colón, 5. The Resolution passed.

11. ADJOURNMENT

The meeting was adjourned 8:09 PM.

ATTEST:

Tad J. Miller
City Clerk