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Eli Meltzer
emeltze3@binghamton.edu

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Participant Observation of a Crowded City Council Meeting

President Calvin Coolidge once said, “Local self-government is one of our most precious possessions,” (Coolidge, 1925) a sentiment that dovetails nicely with the purpose of our course, *Discovering Place*: “to involve oneself in the local culture” and, in my case, local government. As part of my research on the political environment of Binghamton, I decided to attend a Binghamton City Council meeting on Wednesday, October 23, 2019.

I left campus at about 5:45 p.m. on BC Transit for the 6:30 meeting. Despite an irrational, unfounded fear that I had boarded the wrong bus and was headed for a terrifying adventure in Binghamton’s version of Narnia, I pressed on towards City Hall, eager to get to the Council’s chambers. Upon entering City Hall, I was asked by security to remove my backpack and empty my pockets, to which I obliged. Surprisingly, they did not request a photo ID. After walking through a metal detector, my backpack was returned to me and I retrieved my phone and wallet. I had seen some other people go through a door marked “City Council Chambers” near the front desk, and followed them up two staircases into a massive atrium with stunningly bad lighting from tacky chandeliers hanging from the sloping, vaulted ceiling. Directly below the highest part of the ceiling was a large square table where the council members, clerks, and corporate counsel sat. The president was perched on a dais raised slightly above the rest of the table. Beneath the lowest part of the ceiling was about seven rows of audience seating, where I took a seat, second row from the top.

Figure 1
Binghamton City Hall Atrium



Note. By Roger Luther, 2011

That was when I noticed the people around me. When I sat down, there were around fifteen people, scattered around the rows of seats, but as I took in my surroundings, waiting for the council members to arrive, more people filed in, taking seats in the audience. Eventually, there were about fifty people sitting around me, and I heard a man behind me ask his friend, “Have you ever seen so many people at a meeting?” As I waited with bated breath for the meeting to begin and the reason for its uncommon popularity to become clear, I turned my attention to the audience.

The crowd was mostly men, the majority of whom appeared to be working class. Most

Figure 2
Binghamton City Council Chambers



Note. By Roger Luther, 2011

had beards, and some were clad in hoodies and baseball caps. One man wore the Syracuse University blue and orange. I almost challenged him to a duel over school pride, but clearer heads prevailed. A few women were present, one with two children and a man she said was her fiancé. A Binghamton University graduate walked in, dressed in slacks and a light blue button-down, carrying two large maps for his testimony, eliciting snickers from the men around me. One man muttered sarcastically, “Someone came prepared, didn’t he?” as I chuckled along with them. Like the graduate student, most of the audience was there to plead their case in either the public comments section of the meeting or to argue for or against a certain bill on the agenda. The audience was made up of workers at the Binghamton-Johnson City Joint Sewage Plant, homeowners, landlords, and a local real estate broker, as well as the aforementioned graduate student living on the West Side. There were six or seven obvious couples, including the family with two kids.

While observing the people in the audience was the main focus of my attention at the moment, it was the meeting's agenda that would explain its unusual popularity. The first item was an official shakeup of certain zoning regulations that would impose family requirements in certain residential zones of Binghamton, resulting in massive complications for student housing. This has been a longstanding issue in Binghamton and the surrounding area for a long time. For those who disliked their student neighbors, the legislation was a godsend, a recognition of owner-occupiers' influence over renters' rights. One woman spoke for five full minutes about the troubles she's had with her student neighbors: the garbage littering the sides of the street, their blithe attitudes towards parking in their usable driveways, and the sheer noise level at all hours of the night. She insisted that student renters ought to be held to the same standards as someone renting a house on the ocean for a few weeks, with the trash schedule posted on the refrigerator, among other things. She continued that the police don't want to bother the students with parking tickets, for example, and turn on their sirens to give them a chance to get outside to move their cars, further adding to the noise. Another woman echoed her sentiments, complaining that students are loud, unsanitary, and uncompromising.

Conversely, there were a few people speaking out against the council passing the legislation that night, for business reasons, from a student housing landlord who insisted that students were good, "responsible young adults," and were excellent neighbors. As my Uber driver told me on the way back to campus, students are people too: some are good neighbors, and some are bad neighbors. Some people get stuck with the loud, selfish students, while others are fortunate enough to get the conscientious, respectful students. Sitting there in the audience, wearing a Binghamton University T-shirt, I shrank back in my seat when students were attacked. I could feel the audience members' sideways glances directed at me as they must have wondered

if my presence indicated my involvement with these stories. The vote on these new regulations had been scheduled for this meeting, but after listening to the arguments put forth, the council decided to postpone it in favor of hearing more from their constituents.

The second issue was raised during the public comment section of the meeting, regarding the Binghamton-Johnson City Wastewater Treatment Plant. According to the Press & Sun Bulletin (Platsky, 2019), the treatment plant had in recent years suffered inefficiencies at the hands of bad weather, including catastrophic flooding, compounded by ineffective infrastructure and equally poor management. Binghamton Mayor Richard David had proposed the privatization of the plant, which may jeopardize some of its 40 existing jobs. The issue before the council was this proposed privatization of the treatment plant, with at least three companies vying for the contract. It was evidently imperative to the citizens and employees speaking to the council that they be assisted. The woman with two kids appealed to the council's emotions, asking that the council do something for her, her fiancé, and their five children, who can't subsist solely on her fiancé's salary from the sewage plant, even after he'd been there for 13 years. Another man testified to the state-of-the-art facilities at the plant, stressing its uniqueness in the United States at large and adding that it was impossible for new supervisors (referring to private companies) to understand all the ins and outs of operating such a complex system.

During the council members' comments, Councilman Conrad Taylor stood and railed against other members of the council for not taking action to help the civil service workers in retaining their employment, even after the workers came to every meeting "month after month after month," calling the council's inaction "pathetic." His words piqued my interest, and helped me realize how admirable these workers and their families were. They saw that their jobs were in jeopardy and stood up for themselves in a bid to force the council to take notice and help them

and the population they serve. A speech like this from Councilman Taylor was consistent with his own past remarks on the privatization plan, as he was concerned with the effect it might have on the jobs already in place (Platsky, 2019). This late in the election cycle, the council can't do much in the way of aid for the workers, and its composition will significantly change after the election. Nonetheless, I was inspired by the plant workers' fortitude and their commitment to their career—some of the workers at the meeting had been employed by the sewage plant for more than a decade.

After the meeting, as I was waiting for an Uber, a reporter from Pipe Dream, BU's student newspaper, came up to me on the street and asked me for my opinions on the zoning regulations. Being overtired and stressed, my mind went blank. After a short and painfully awkward pause, he began speaking, saving me from further embarrassment. He told me how unusual it was for the council to listen so raptly to the citizens and postpone the zoning vote as they had in order for "further discussion" at a later date. Usually, he said, the council members come to the meeting with their minds already made up and pass or reject the law regardless of the people's opinions. He echoed the man's remark at the beginning of the meeting regarding the considerable size of the audience, adding that there were usually only one or two audience members per meeting. He then reiterated my good fortune to have come specifically that night. He was right. This meeting was a great example of local government attempting to help the people according to their needs. The mood of most people leaving the chambers was mild satisfaction, as many had, for the near future, succeeded in avoiding the new zoning regulations or grabbed the ear of the council with their heart-throbbing story about the sewage plant.

While some people view the concept of local politics through a wholesome lens, reinforced by the contagious cooperative atmosphere in the earlier items on the agenda, those

who attended this meeting were reminded that it is sometimes, well, *political*. Going into the meeting, council member Dan Livingston had been embroiled in an ethics scandal concerning an intern he had hired who worked for his reelection campaign under the radar of the rest of the council. His breach of the ethics rules laid out by the council prompted several of his colleagues to rail against his apparently unscrupulous actions. He preemptively defended himself to the rest of the council, a shield that was deemed insincere by the council members who rebuked him afterwards. These frankly vicious speeches and rebuttals were in stark contrast to the cooperative and conciliatory attitude that had pervaded the meeting until that point. The council members were probably thinking about what they were going to say in their speeches throughout the meeting, waiting to let loose on Councilman Livingston before a captive audience. Though jarring, it was a fitting reminder that politics is a ruthless game, and even local politicians can fall prey to its nasty behavioral incentives.

Politics is all about cultivating relationships with people. This is especially true for local politics. Networking in professional as well as social circles is imperative to becoming a successful politician, for a rising politician needs support and fundraising from established people in the community in order to accomplish his goals. Those goals, however, are set by the politician's constituents, which makes the relationship between an elected official and his electors key to his success. This may explain the difference in the council members' generally patient treatment of the witnesses who spoke and the treatment of their allegedly unethical colleague, Mr. Livingston. From an optimistic perspective, as the majority of the council saw it, he had let down his constituents towards whom he had the utmost obligation to respect their wishes. It was their responsibility to check Mr. Livingston's actions, to curb his actions before he went too far, and if they failed in that regard, to air their grievances out in the open, out of

respect for the people who elected them. That respect, ultimately, is the motivator of a local politician.

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