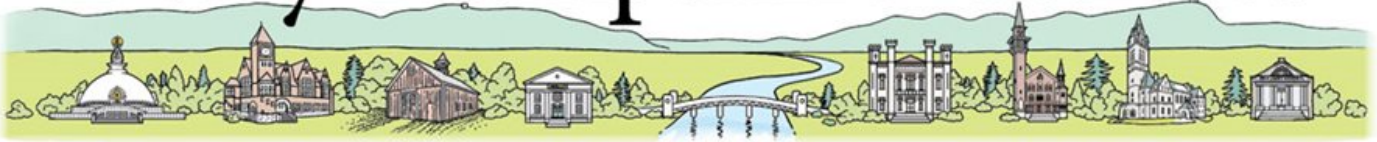


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Columnist Dennis Bidwell: Start the year by finding common ground



Police Chief Jody Kasper, standing at left, fields a question during a meeting Sept. 13 at the Northampton Senior Center to discuss the use of surveillance cameras in downtown Northampton. GAZETTE FILE PHOTO

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Police Chief Jody Kasper's initiation of a Northampton community conversation about the possibility of placing additional security cameras downtown sparked debate that preoccupied the City Council, and at times the larger community, for the last four months of 2017. On radio, social media, online and in print media, the polarized debate hasn't let up.

At a time of grave concern about the priorities and potential abuse of power of our national government, it was inevitable that a local issue would become a vehicle for expressing anxieties about the national security apparatus. It has been a difficult environment in which to distinguish the local from the national, to make considered decisions involving city government in the swirl of national resistance agendas.

The national mood led to a polarizing atmosphere: Are you for the camera ordinance or are you against it? Do you support government surveillance or don't you? Are you a defender of civil liberties or aren't you? Nuance, discernment and balance were the victims.

Scheduled City Council votes made it hard to remain open-minded. We on the council, and many in the larger community, were expected to be for or against. Once positions were taken, there was no turning back. Positions were hardened.

Explaining and defending those positions almost inevitably involved hyperbole in the service of debate and spirited argument. I'm not pointing fingers here — I succumbed to hyperbole in defending my position that the proposed camera ordinance was unnecessary and ill-advised.

When the votes were taken, a majority of the council supported the ordinance to largely ban additional permanent municipal security cameras downtown. Mayor David Narkewicz, who was never supportive of the proposed ordinance, then exercised his authority under the city's charter to veto the measure.

But in vetoing the ordinance, Mayor Narkewicz didn't simply send it back to the council with the reasons he found it unwise. He accompanied his veto with a proposal for an amended ordinance that he would be prepared to sign into law.

We, the City Council and the larger community, now have a chance to seize this opportunity for common ground. Like the mayor, I'd prefer there be no ordinance at all — I believe the City Council has ample control of this matter through the expenditure approval process. But, like the mayor, I concede that a majority of the council, with the support of many passionate members of the community, would prefer that an ordinance provide another check on the ability of the mayor or police chief to install additional cameras. Therefore I'm ready to compromise and accept an ordinance.

I support the mayor's suggested ordinance changes. The major effects would be to make the ban on new municipal cameras citywide, thus avoiding the awkwardness and arbitrariness of banning cameras only on certain downtown streets; and to allow for the possibility that, if the police chief and mayor determine the need for a particular deployment of cameras, they could bring their proposal to a well-publicized public hearing, after which the council could approve or disapprove the specific request.

This is an artful and useful compromise, in my view — one that meets the concerns of the anti-camera constituency more than halfway.

The overwhelming majority of people who have contacted me since the mayor put forward his compromise have been supportive of it. Their support has been based on agreement with the substance of the compromise, and also on a belief that it would be good to set an example of good governance by coming together, by showing that the various players in this heated debate can all give a little and show generosity of spirit toward one another in doing so.

I was struck by one of the TV commercials used by Doug Jones in his successful campaign to bring Alabamians of different stripes together in his successful senatorial campaign. The tag line of that commercial was: "There's honor in compromise and civility."

I'm also struck by the refrain heard more and more throughout the country — compromise is necessary for government to work properly. And Tuesday's Northampton inauguration ceremony was filled with pleas for unity, wholeness and generosity of spirit.

I urge us all to take the mayor's suggested alternative ordinance as the framework for devising a compromise ordinance that we can all live with. It would result in better public policy, and equally important, it would demonstrate our intentions to proceed in the new year in a spirit of civility and generosity aimed at finding common ground wherever possible.

Dennis Bidwell, of Northampton, is the Ward 2 city councilor.

