

Gadfly Testifies (2)

The Bethlehem Gadfly Gadfly's posts, Lehigh University, Serious Issues October 13, 2018

(2nd in a series of posts on Lehigh University)

Nicole, Radzievich, "Take a peek at Lehigh University's latest project: 'Bridge West'." *Morning Call*, October 11, 2018.

Gadfly attended the Planning Commission meeting described in Nicole's article.

The only spectator.

Tickets to the Planning Commission meetings are a tad or two easier to obtain than to Dr. Phil.

To summarize: *Lehigh University has embarked on a breathtaking ambitious plan to increase its national reputation by adding a 5th college to its academic roster, adding 1800 students-faculty-staff, and turning its lower (Asa Packer) campus into a walking campus. Lehigh has chosen to site new construction associated with this worthy plan on previous parking lots on lower campus, causing a loss of over 800 parking spaces. (For comparison purposes, our New St. Garage has 626 spaces, our Walnut St. Garage has 750 spaces.) That's a lot of lost parking for a lower campus on which parking was already tight. It was previously claimed at City meetings at which the Gadfly attended that a Lehigh comprehensive parking study showed the university could absorb that loss on its campuses (Lehigh has several campuses: Asa Packer, Mountaintop, Goodman, Southside), that is, not spilling out onto Bethlehem streets. Yet in the roll out of its "Connections" plan, Lehigh has apparently leased 150 spaces in a Northside lot at 123 W. Lehigh St. (adjacent to the Wooden Match and the entrance to Sand Island) from the Bethlehem Parking Authority. That Northside component came as a surprise to Gadfly, who had witnessed questions about use of that lot for other purposes at other City meetings met with garbled responses. Lehigh's contract was not acknowledged at those times. Gadfly now understands why the responses were garbled.*

Parking on campus in this new "Connections" plan will cost faculty and staff \$500/yr. This "Northside Commuter Lot" across the river, said to be .75 miles from Farrington Square at the lower end of the Asa Packer campus, will be free, and serviced by a bus every 10 minutes to transport users to campus. Faculty and staff will be given a \$250

“signing bonus” the first year to sweeten the transition to the new more tightly monitored (spaces will be assigned) and much more expensive plan. The system is highly regimented. Gadfly, for instance, a retired Lehigh faculty member, will pay \$86/yr to park on lower campus only after 4pm and weekends and will not be permitted to park during weekdays. Northside lot users who work further up campus will transfer to another bus at Farrington Square.

It is not clear to Gadfly whether Lehigh staff in the “Connections” plan includes workers for Sodexo or Brickman or whatever companies like that Lehigh contracts lower-level-wage work to, and probably not technically Lehigh employees any more. At the information session Gadfly attended, there was no answer to that question. It might be that many cleaning people, for instance, work at night when parking is basically unregulated, so there is no problem there. But the status of that level staffer was not clear. And needs to be.

Now why Lehigh chose to cram all this construction onto lower campus when it has acres of space elsewhere would be an obvious question to an outsider.

But there are no doubt good answers for that question, and, in any event, what Lehigh does within its perimeters and with its faculty and staff is its own business.

For Gadfly it’s that surprise appearance of the Northside commuter lot that perked up his antennae.

Gadflies ask questions.

In essence, then, Gadfly posed the two questions in his previous post to the Planning Commission:

1) If the City has some parking space needs (maybe we don’t), is it ok to be opening that [Northside] area to Lehigh?

There is a multi-step bureaucratic process to build in Bethlehem. Lehigh has been bringing the various individual pieces of its new plan to the various committees one at a time. Almost each piece has a parking component. Approved one at a time, it is easy to lose sight of the total number of parking losses cumulatively mounting. Gadfly’s sense was that the Planning committee was surprised at the 800+ total number. Gadfly suggested that somebody had to take a Big Picture view, especially in light of the move to the Northside, which committee members were not aware of. The question that needs discussion is why the City should bail Lehigh out for decisions it made that affected parking. And does the City have a higher priority for that Northside space? If the City has discussed

this, I think we should know the details. My sense – and it's only a sense – is that the contract has been kept under the radar. Gadfly could well be wrong, but he would like to be sure that discussion was in the open.

2) Does the City owe some thought to these people [the low wage workers who will gravitate to the Northside free lot]?

Gadfly wonders about and worries about the people forced, in effect, to choose that faraway free lot. One can easily imagine that lower paid faculty and staff will not be able to afford the \$500/yr. Gadfly – a Bethlehem resident and tax payer – couldn't have in his first few years of work there. Low paid adjunct faculty and grad students will seek the free lot. If the cleaning people, the cafeteria workers, the grounds people are involved, then, for sure, they will seek the free lot. A percentage of these people will be City residents, City taxpayers. Should we care about "our" people who could find 1 – 1 1/2/hrs added to their work day just getting to the free lot and back?

Is Gadfly too much a bleeding heart? It's ok, you can say it.

The Planning Commission was lenient, giving Gadfly more time to talk than is usually given, answering rebuttals and explanations by Lehigh's lawyer. Bottom line seemed to be Lehigh saying we have abided by all the City regulations and guidelines (which they have, no question), with Gadfly saying something dramatic like "there's law and then there's concern for people."

Interestingly, when the Commission chair asked for a motion to approve the Lehigh plan, no committee members responded, which I took to mean they were troubled. Seeing no committee action, the chair dutifully made the motion himself, to which the 4 members all voted aye but, to my eyes, not without some hesitation. They were thinking about the issues.

Gadfly made a mistake. A rookie. He should have offered the suggestion that the motion be tabled, asking Lehigh to come back in a week with a more detailed analysis of who will be using that Northside Commuter Lot. (Why do you always think of these things when you are back in the car?) That may have given the members an option for their unease and, frankly, it would have given Gadfly some assurance that the "little guys" were fairly treated.

Gadfly is a soft touch where the little guys are concerned. I want my City to have that soft touch too.

Again, it is Lehigh's business, but, as Gadfly pointed out to the Planners, the system seems a bit absurd: it's like working at City Hall but having to park at Lump's Deli on Center and bus in.

Just me?

Gadfly will raise the issue again Tuesday to the full City Council.

Bleeding heart gadflies are indefatigable.