



Buckets of questions about the Packer Ave. closing

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 Latest in a series of posts about Lehigh University and the Southside 

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Gadfly:

Re: Proposal to do a temporary closure of Packer Ave with an impact study

Many of us who attended the public meeting about the Packer Ave closure [Broughal Middle School January 23], and a number of my neighbors whom I've talked to about it since, have concerns about how any study of a temporary closure might be approached so that the most useful and accurate data would inform decision-making in the city, and so that pedestrians (and drivers) would be safe during the duration of the study.

So this is what I asked city council and the mayor and his administration to consider before authorizing the temporary closure.

The questions are in two buckets: #1 is whether the city wants/needs to consider this closure (permanent or study period closure) at all, and if so, whether the time is appropriate now. The #2 bucket is "if the city decides to do the temporary closure/study" questions.

Bucket #1 –should the temporary closure/study be done and why?

1) What does the city hope to achieve with the proposed closure of Packer – not just with the short-term study time, but what is the city's **key objective** for the proposed long-term closure of that section of Packer? Who will benefit? What will be gained? Who may lose? Do the gains outweigh the losses as we contemplate this closure?

2) *[This was answered, mostly, or at least the accident data was. Without comparison to other locations it's hard to know if this is a key dangerous intersection or one of many, or what . . .]* One item we are still missing is data about how unsafe or safe that Packer Ave. crossing really is; no one has produced that data yet, despite Lehigh's assertion that it appears to be an unsafe crossing. LU spokespersons have repeatedly and publicly said safety is part of what drives this closure idea. Can we learn more from existing safety data before diving into a study?

3) The other key reason cited by LU for the closure of Packer is that this would encourage students to feel the campus extends all the way to New, and could help them get closer to the commercial area and venture into it (on 4th and 3rd). We already know that students tend to feel ill at ease going into the Southside, and that when they venture down they often go there by crossing (a) Morton, down New, and (b) across 4th St. Isn't it more likely that their Southside psychological boundaries/barriers are those streets rather than at Packer (hence the New Street revitalization plan to lure them past Morton and 4th, and down New)? How would the Packer closure affect Morton, in particular, with increased traffic and pedestrian movement? Will the closure adversely affect student movement north toward the commercial area, or will it encourage that foot traffic, as Lehigh asserts?

- How and who will assess all of that – the study's traffic consultants, a city business study, or another Lehigh study? If that student movement to the business district is a key objective in closing Packer, how will we know if the goal of increased pedestrian movement into the commercial area has been achieved, and when would we expect to know that?

4) Morton Street and the upper campus road are currently very congested due to university construction projects. Is this the best time to undertake a temporary or permanent closure, while those roads are narrowed, and there are flaggers, trucks, and equipment entering and exiting the construction sites all day long?

- If the study goes forward, will the consultants measure pedestrian (and car) safety, not just at intersections but along that whole block of Morton where the street has been narrowed for construction, and the effect of the sidewalk closure on the south side of the street?
- Will pedestrians really be safe during the study, while construction is ongoing?
- Will the consultants measure the car traffic before and during the study to know the effects on the upper campus-E/W route across the Southside (including effects on the nearby neighborhoods)? *[key issue of concern to my neighbors and me, over here!]*

BUCKET #2 –if the temporary closure and study go forward

But if one does think a temporary closure and study is a good idea, what is/will be written into that consulting contract? Is there language in the contract spelling out what the consultants must study: what exactly is to be studied, and how? How will the results be made public, and will those results be shared before the decision is made to close Packer for good, or not? Will the public have an opportunity to provide their feedback on the temporary closure to Lehigh and the city? More specifically, then:

1) Will the consultants be studying the effects on pedestrians (and if so, is this something they know how to do, or do they need help from consultants who are more familiar with that kind of work)? We should be careful to use consultants who are experienced in pedestrian studies, and wary of using ones who may only specialize in vehicle traffic; I have no idea what these consultants are known for, but their performance in the public meeting at Broughal indicated to me that they had not thought about pedestrian studies much, if at all. It appeared that they only had focused their plans on the vehicle traffic.

Among the things we should know are

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- how do they plan to track Broughal student walking patterns and safety, and changes in those patterns and safety (if any)
- and how do they account for safety issues as they study pedestrian movement in the extended area including Brodhead, Summit, over to Montclair and Carlton, down to 4th Street and perhaps 3rd as well; and eastward on Webster, 4th, 5th, and E.Packer.
- What will Council learn about safety issues in the whole study area, by the end of the study?

2) *[This was kind of answered, although it will be a shorter data collection period than folks first assumed when it was first announced.]* How would the consultants plan to account for the traffic and pedestrian data in the earliest days of the study and closure, which will be done when Lehigh students and most faculty are on spring break: will that data be averaged in with the rest, thus skewing the results? Studying traffic and pedestrians over spring break would definitely not provide representative data, although I see why Lehigh wants to start putting out blockades when students aren't around and perhaps traffic is lighter. But that time should not be averaged into the data that is collected when the usual school year traffic (cars and pedestrians) is in full swing.

3) As my neighbors and I have shared with the mayor and the Lehigh Public Affairs VP, many of us suspect that W.8th to University Dr, and across campus, will become an even more appealing way to traverse the Southside (E-W and W-E) if/when Packer would be closed. Yet there will be even more construction up there on University Drive next year. The consultants should measure the before and after closure effects on that route, and also consider what could change when the next phase of dorm demolition and construction begins this summer through next year. Do we know if this is being considered in the study? I hope that the city will request a clear answer, and consider the following as well:

- Is the upper campus route going to be part of the city study, or would that be left to Lehigh to do separately from the consultant study? Would they include the surrounding neighborhood streets and what happens to traffic there? Will they share the data and seek community feedback?

- Will the city be able to study the W.8th street entrance to campus and whether traffic is increased on that rather congested street that runs from Wyandotte into campus? What will be the impact on the streets to the east side of campus?
- Would the data from a Lehigh campus road study be something accessible to the public, and would it be incorporated into city decision making?

4) Also, how will we know the effect of the closing when it snows? I mentioned at the public meeting that most of us over here are definitely aware that one doesn't drive on Morton Street when it's snowy; the city has never been able to maintain that street effectively; it is usually covered in slush, ice and/or snow for a number of days before things melt away- not ideal for Broughal kids and parents! That may be because of the way the buildings on the street shade the road surface, but I'm not sure. Local folks just all try to avoid driving there when the weather gets bad. It's a safety issue without any additional added traffic, whether for cars, buses or pedestrians; more traffic in snowy weather is a scary thought.

5) Finally, IF the trial closure and study are authorized by Council, you all, as well as residents and those who work in the area also should **know how the final decision about long term closure would be made:**

- **who besides the consultants will give or collect feedback**
- **when**
- **where**
- **and how**

...before the final decision is made? What key issues will the mayor deem relevant to his recommendation?

I guess I don't see all these questions as insurmountable, but as many of us see it, **answering these questions in Bucket #2 (all of them) should mean that the planning for the traffic/pedestrian study would be quite careful, the study itself quite extensive, and both should include voices from the community.**

- Planning and contracting with consultants should also mean investigating their expertise in pedestrian studies.
- **And there should be a plan in place, before the study begins, to present the results of the study and hear from the public before any final decision is made.**

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