

Bridge process: a model of democratic citizen engagement plus an equally vigorous response from city government

The Bethlehem Gadfly Budget, Pedestrian bridge November 24, 2020

 *Latest in a series of posts on the pedestrian bridge* 

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Dear Gadfly :

There has been some unfortunate controversy raised over the proposed feasibility study of the pedestrian/biking bridge. After a resounding 6-1 affirmation of the proposal last week, it seems that this decision is still being tested.

So, perhaps it's time to put the bridge aside for a moment . . .

Let's address a subject quite unrelated to economic, transportational, and social issues. That is, the remarkable, possibly unprecedented, democratic process that yielded the feasibility study in the first place. The public record of that citizen-lead process stands on its own:

Six public meetings at the IceHouse and City Hall.

A citizen financed Vision Statement facilitated by national consultancy firm Neighbours Inc.

A twenty-five page report documenting our community conversation on the bridge.

Two Lehigh University architecture courses exploring the design of the bridge.

Thirty endorsements including the City Health Bureau, The Bethlehem Chamber of Commerce, ArtsQuest, and Discover Lehigh Valley.

These citizen-initiated actions were met with an exemplary response by Bethlehem city government and the Mayor. The city's contribution to the study includes voting almost unanimously two times in support of the feasibility study, generously following and supporting the process by the City Planning Department, and engaging in four interviews with nationally recognized design firms.

In short, a model of democratic citizen engagement was met with an equally vigorous response from city government. Together, this dual response to a possible pedestrian/biking bridge marks a progressive means of addressing new ideas and public decision-making. In many ways, this is more important than the bridge itself!

Thanks, Doug

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