


Meeting on closing Packer Ave.: “no one bubbled over with excitement”

The Bethlehem Gadfly Lehigh University, Southside January 27, 2020

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

Charles Malinchak, “Bethlehem mayor: ‘No decision has been made to close Packer Avenue. Period.’” Morning Call, January 24, 2020.

Should Bethlehem’s Packer Avenue be temporarily closed to vehicles for a few blocks around Lehigh University? City and university officials held a public forum Thursday night [January 23] to discuss the question.

Packer Avenue fronts Lehigh University on the city’s South Side and the stretch of road poised to be open only to pedestrians would be from Vine to Webster streets from March 16 to the end of April.

Don’t get lost in visions of a spring stroll in the middle of Packer, because at this point it is only a idea, and according to Mayor Robert Donchez, who made a presentation at the forum at Broughal Middle School, “Let me be very clear. No decision has been made to close Packer. Period.”

About 50 people attended the presentation that lasted more than an hour, during which many asked questions about the impact the closure would have on South Side traffic, but no one bubbled over with excitement.

Lehigh University Associate Vice President of Facilities Brent Stringfellow was the lead speaker, who said closing the road could help dissolve the divide between the university and the South Side neighborhoods. “It’s an opportunity to shift the gravity and bring a more integrated community. Packer Avenue was a borderline,” he said.

Donchez said the city has developed a good relationship with the university and the idea of ceding the road to only pedestrians is not new. “This has been something talked about for 20 to 25 years,” he said.

One point made was the closure could enhance safety on a street with foot traffic predominated by Lehigh students.

Parking on Packer was another issue raised, and according to Bethlehem Parking Authority Interim Executive Director Steven Fernstrom the road has 64 metered spaces.

Another concern was whether the closure would create considerably more traffic on the surrounding streets, which Stringfellow said would also be a subject included in the Pennoni study.

Another area still being worked on is a method of getting community feedback about the plan now and when it is in place.

One person not feeling the excitement was Lehigh senior Nancy Kim, who said she didn't see the safety angle of the plan and thought more crosswalks might be more beneficial. She also thought the closure appears to benefit Lehigh more than the South Side.

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