

The proposed Packer Ave. Promenade

The Bethlehem Gadfly Affordable Housing, Lehigh University, Neighborhoods, Southside July 1, 2019

(Latest in a series of posts relating to Lehigh University, the Southside, and neighborhoods)

“Lehigh University proposes to have the City of Bethlehem vacate the portion of Packer Avenue from Webster Street to Vine Street to create a pedestrian corridor.”

– Lehigh Traffic Study

Gadfly is confident that we have all at one time or another been traveling on Packer Ave. through the Lehigh campus and experienced the hazardous crossing right at the main entrance.

Especially at class change time, students and faculty flow *en masse* up and down across Packer Ave., sometimes almost oblivious to traffic.

Students coming down the hill often flow with such force and determination that you are reminded of one of the falls in the Jim Thorpe area.

Students going uphill have the primal focus of salmon going upstream to spawn.

While students sometimes seem oblivious, drivers run the gamut from impatience to anger.

It's not a good scene.

For this and other reasons having to do with a new physical plan in operation for the campus, Lehigh (as Gadfly first noted in the student newspaper back in March) is exploring seeking approval from the City to make Packer between Adams and Vine a promenade.

The safety concern would be eliminated.

And one can see good things in such a plan from Lehigh's perspective. A promenade would help unify the lower campus buildings and fit right in to the (laudable) goal of a walking campus.

At a meeting two or three weeks ago, Gadfly heard the Mayor say there was no definite decision yet, but the positive thing he saw was a better flow of students down to the 4th St. businesses. So, at first blush, good for the City economics too.

In early May, a group from a Lehigh graduate class studying this proposal made a presentation to our Environmental Advisory Council (EAC), primarily, I think, to recommend use of their assessment tool — Sustainability Impact Assessment (SIA) — to complement existing planning processes in new development projects.

Active Gadfly follower Peter Crownfield seems to have been involved in the assessment (see the conclusion to the executive summary), and I am sure we will hear from him.

Here is the complete PowerPoint presentation: [Packer Promenade – Sustainability Council](#).

And here the executive summary:

Sustainability Impact Assessment: Packer Promenade Project at Lehigh University

Executive Summary

Sustainability requires considering impacts on human-well-being and quality of life. A Sustainability Impact Assessment (SIA) is an alternative to the traditional Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) that has more potential for public participation and expands the scope of impacts that are assessed

Introduction

Lehigh University is exploring the possibility of converting Packer Avenue into a pedestrian promenade. In Spring 2019, Lehigh University graduate students conducted an SIA for this potential project. The effort was modeled on an SIA that was conducted in the City of Easton for the Da Vinci Science Center. SIAs offer a sustainability-minded, comprehensive guide to decision-makers through broad stakeholder participation that ensures input from diverse participants and transparency.

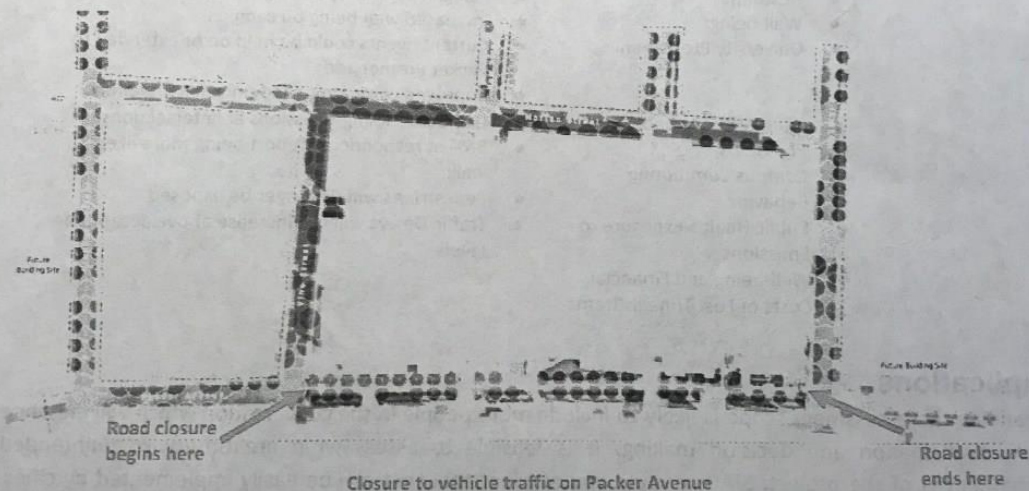


Figure 1: Illustration of Packer Promenade Concept.

Approaches and Results

While EIAs rely on a one-size fits all approach to assessment, SIAs encourage using the assessment tool most appropriate to the stakeholder and impact being assessed. The Packer Promenade SIA identified six key categories for assessment. Methods of assessment were tailored to each category and generally included literature reviews, interviews with experts and stakeholders, surveys, and quantitative data collection. Table 1 summarizes the results for each category.

Table 1: Summary of Impacts

- | | |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stormwater runoff • Biodiversity • Construction | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decreased amount of impermeable surface cover • Increased biodiversity • Follow best practices for construction to prevent environmental damage |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local businesses and restaurants • Zoellner Arts organizations • Handicap Access and Mobility Impairments • Pedestrian Health • Pedestrian Behavior | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased traffic on Fourth and Morton Streets should increase economic vitality • Zoellner's parking issues require mitigation • Increased opportunity for pedestrian health and recreation (66% of respondents report being more likely to participate in recreation activities) • Enhanced mobility of students, faculty, and staff with mobility impairments or physical disabilities |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pedestrian safety • Emergency access for ambulances, fire trucks, and service vehicles | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved pedestrian safety • No affect to response times or access for emergency and service vehicles |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aesthetics • Well-being • University Programming | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lehigh community prefers a promenade setting • Increased well-being on campus • Current events could be held on or extended to Packer Promenade • Improved community and university relations |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Idling Vehicles and GHG Emissions • Campus Commuting Behavior • Public Health-Exposure to Emissions • Well-being and Financial Costs of Lost Time in Traffic | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decreased idling emissions at intersections • 56% of respondents report being more likely to walk • Pedestrians will no longer be exposed • Traffic Delays will not increase above acceptable levels |

Implications

Expanding the assessment scope is likely to include more people in the conversation which will enhance public participation and decision making. It is feasible to assess what are otherwise unintended consequences of the project. SIA is a rapid and efficient tool that can be easily implemented by cities. Because SIA is flexible, it can be appropriately scaled to the size of the project.

Conclusion

The methods used for the Packer Promenade SIA could be applied to other types of projects, not only at universities, but also in cities. The City of Bethlehem does not require a formal assessment process for new development projects, but does try to obtain wide-ranging information from various city departments, stakeholders, and partners to determine potential impacts. The Bethlehem Environmental Advisory Council should recommend SIA as a required assessment tool to formalize and complement the existing planning and zoning process in order to ensure that sustainability becomes a routine consideration as the City of Bethlehem pursues new development projects. For more information contact David Casagrande (dac511@lehigh.edu) or Peter Crownfield (peter@sustainlv.org).

Per Gadfly usual practice, let's look at the primary sources before we editorialize and criticize.

But Gadfly had in mind then at the EAC presentation and has more in mind now with the South Bethlehem Historical Society May 22 letter about the impact of “progress” on the Southside still bubbling on his brain things like impact on the residential neighborhood, consultation with neighbors, and the dreaded “Lehigh sprawl.”

So join me in chewing on the Packer Ave. Promenade proposal.