

Looking at BPA numbers (5)

The Bethlehem Gadfly Parking, Southside July 24, 2019

(99th in a series of posts on parking)

A Gadfly tip o' the hat to Dana and several others for answering questions and filling in gaps of Gadfly ignorance on previous posts in this "BPA numbers" series!" Much ignorance! Much appreciated!

Mrs. Gadfly is happy that we're having internet trouble.

She says this series of posts on BPA numbers is killing her.

She fears Gadfly followers are catatonic.

She's probably right.

But bear with Gadfly for one more post as he tries to read closely the BPA financial documents.

He's trying to figure out if he trusts the BPA on the Polk Street Garage or not.

Always remember that this is a \$16.8m project with another like price tag for the Walnut Street Garage tagging along right behind. It behooves us to look at the numbers. And think about them.

—

One thing Gadfly doesn't see in the numbers.

The [Desman Parking Study](#) (page 54) suggested setting up a \$200,000 capital repair and replacement line item:

Historically, the BPA has paid for new equipment and repairs to its parking garages and surface lots from operating revenues. However, DESMAN typically recommends that parking owners set aside funds annually to be used for future capital repair and replacement projects, as opposed to financing these projects with debt. If the BPA chooses to follow this practice, that would mean setting aside more than \$200,000 annually to pay for these future costs.

Gadfly may have missed this in the budget details, but he doesn't think the BPA has acted on this good suggestion.

—

And Gadfly wondered about the Mayor justifying need for the PSG on the basis of unnamed future projects in the eastern corridor of 3rd Street. Gadfly wondered if indeed there were actually more projects in the pipeline.

[DESMAN](#) (pages 54-61) says it “consulted with the City’s Community and Economic Development and Planning and Zoning departments in order to establish a realistic picture of development” and found there was significant anticipated development, although, of course, still unnamed in the report.

Desman speaks of plans for a 600 space PSG. The current working plan is 475 spaces (which would be significantly filled by current commitments), though a larger building was discussed at the last BPA Board meeting and seems still possible.

—

Contract parking rates have been a vexed point in discussions Gadfly has witnessed. Are institutional users getting a deal on the backs of the average “Joe and Josephine” who feed the meters? Are, for instance, Lehigh University and St. Luke’s getting a “deal” at the New St. Garage?

The contract rates are \$65/month, and \$5 increases are planned in 2020 and 2024, and that rate is standard across all contract users in all the garages in the system. In the [DESMAN](#) study (page 52), we find “Monthly parking rates in public garages in these municipalities [the comparison cities] range from \$65-\$275, with an average of \$117, compared to \$65 in Bethlehem.” At the July 2 meeting we learned that Allentown is \$75 and Scranton is \$95.

Our \$65 compared to an average of \$117? (Well, to be fair, there are some outliers in the comparison group, so that average number is no doubt inflated.)

Our \$65 compared to \$75 in Allentown?

How’s that feel to you?

Increases are planned, but we will still be at the bottom of the scale. There does not seem to be an attempt to make us comparable in this specific area.

At the July 2 meeting the BPA Board chair said the low rate was a good thing. But without substantiation. Gadfly would like to hear the argument for that.

Our low rate ranking was part of the argument for raising the meter rates from \$1/hr. to \$1.50/hr.: “parking rates charged in Bethlehem are too low and an argument can be made for increasing parking rates to more closely align with the rates charged in comparable cities” (page 52).

The meters went up 50%.

Would not the same logic apply to the garage rates?

—

Lastly.

The significance of the so-called “Ruins lots” adjoining SteelStacks is a persistent thread in the DESMAN report. Those lots now provide free parking for approximately 300 cars. If the lots are not available, the study indicates significant parking problems on eastern Southside. [DESMAN](#) recommends either a PSG or an agreement with the owners, now Wind Creek, about the Ruins lots (pages 69-70).

As noted previously, the combination of new development and an unreliable source of existing parking on the east side of the southside downtown has the potential to create a significant parking shortage within the next few years. The nearly 300 vehicles parking in the Ruins East and Ruins West lots during the weekday peak period could be displaced, if and when restrictions are imposed on parking in these facilities. In addition, development which is expected to be completed by 2019 is anticipated to generate demand for approximately 180 more parking spaces than are being constructed as part of the projects. Finally, additional future development on this side of the southside downtown has the potential to generate the demand for hundreds, if not thousands, of additional parking spaces.

For these reasons, it is recommended that a plan be developed to manage the impending parking shortfall on the east side of the southside downtown. This plan could include a new parking structure, which has been discussed in the past for the corner of E. 3rd Street and Polk Street, or a formalized agreement with the Sands Corporation [now Wind

Creek] to ensure that the SteelStacks parking lots will remain available for public parking in the long-term.

Councilwoman Van Wirt is suggesting, Gadfly believes, that no decision on the PSG be made before clarity about the Ruins lots. Which is reasonable. As far as Gadfly can see, no “official” statement about the continued availability of the Ruins lots has been made. The statement of their unavailability by Councilman Callahan at the July 16 meeting would be considered hearsay by Judge Judy. Can we do better than that? What can we know “for sure”?

Can the City seek clarification from Wind Creek about their plans for the Ruins lots?

Can the City negotiate a plan with Wind Creek providing enough lead time for the construction of a garage if Wind Creek decides to revoke public parking there?

Perhaps naive questions by the Gadfly but worth asking he thinks.

As always, Gadfly invites your comments on what you see in the BPA documents or on his ramblings in the past several posts.