

Council Candidates – 4-year seat – Prompt 5 (31)

The Bethlehem Gadfly Candidates for election, Gadfly's posts, Serious Issues April 27, 2019

(31st in a series of posts on candidates for election)

BCDC is hosting a candidates' forum May 6, 6PM,

at Steelworkers Hall,

53 E. Lehigh St.

Election Day is May 21

5 candidates

vote for 3

5th in the series of candidate statements

statements in reverse-alphabetical order this time

<https://thebrownandwhite.com/2019/03/24/packer-avenue-transformation-lehigh/>

On March 24, The Brown and White, the Lehigh University student newspaper, reported that Lehigh was exploring a pedestrian walkway on Packer Avenue, presumably between Brodhead and Webster Streets. Such a street “vacation” – should it ever be formally and officially proposed – would ultimately come before City Council for final disposition. Without prejudging how you would vote on such a now hypothetical proposal, describe what factors you would need to consider before reaching a decision.

Gadfly has been adding a bit of context to each of the prompts for the candidates. Here is what he gave to the candidates with this prompt: “I’m assuming you wouldn’t make a snap decision. I’m assuming that you wouldn’t immediately see such a proposal as “black and white.” I’m assuming that you would weigh factors. I’m assuming that you will see that there are legal, technical, economic, cultural, historical, and political considerations involved in such a decision. I’m not sure we would call Lehigh a ‘developer,’ but some of the same tensions and controversies we have seen with developers may come into play here. Lehigh and the Southside have a ‘history.’ So, what different kinds of information would you want to have? Who would you want to hear from? Who are the stakeholders in such a decision? Preliminarily, what benefits do you see? Preliminarily, what concerns do you have? Preliminarily, what issues will you need to be sensitive to? What do you immediately ‘get’? What would you need to do more thinking about? Do not make a decision in your response to this prompt. The idea behind the prompt is to get an idea of how you would approach making a decision that may not be as clear-cut to many people as it seems on the surface and that may have conflicting ramifications. The idea behind the prompt is to get an idea how prepared you are to recognize and reconcile multiple perspectives.”



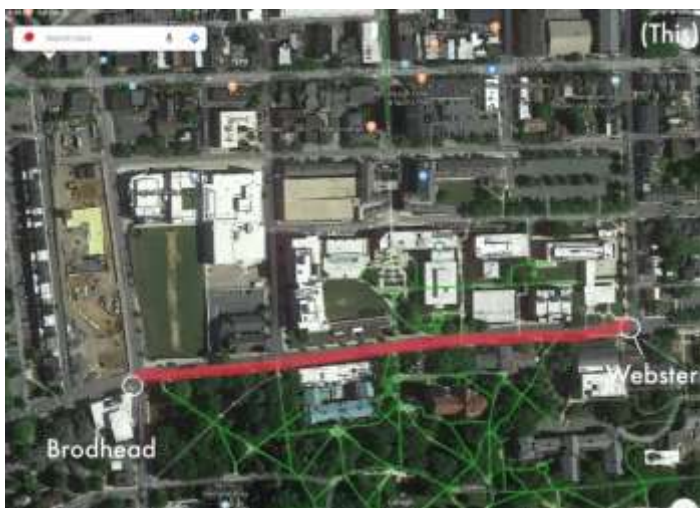
Paige Van Wirt (incumbent)

When I think of how the closing of Packer Avenue between Brodhead and Webster is conceived and presented to the community, a framework which does not include just the few blocks around the area but rather all of South Bethlehem, and even Bethlehem proper, is useful.

From a City Council perspective, we are charged first and foremost with keeping our citizens safe. This means getting a traffic study done by an independent firm, chosen by the city and funded by Lehigh, to understand the impact of closure on our emergency vehicles access to the community. Is it safe?

Once this factor is understood, the traffic study should address impact on local residents' commute. Will this closure shunt traffic to quiet neighborhood streets? If so, different avenues of access and egress need to be determined and then upgraded by Lehigh to assure there is not an impact on local neighborhoods.

We would require an understanding of how this project would impact local businesses, schools, and cultural organizations. These stakeholders must be brought into the planning from the very start, preferably with the leadership of local neighborhood organizations, and organized by the city, rather than Lehigh University. Citizen participation in well-organized "Town halls" in the neighborhood, can help break down many issues, forge new relationships between "town and gown" and give opportunities for innovative solutions from the local citizens themselves.



Lehigh University, center bottom; E. 4th St., l. to r. along top

Once we understand the impact of the project on safety, traffic, local businesses and neighbors, we then turn to strategy. Council would be giving city-owned land to Lehigh University. If we are to vacate such a large swath of city land, in the name of increasing walkability for Lehigh University, we should use this opportunity to require Lehigh U, in exchange for this city land, to conceptualize and implement dedicated bike lanes and walking path upgrades that connect the University better to 3rd street and 4th street, grocery stores, cultural arts organizations, and other bike/walk trails such as the Greenway and the D and L (<https://delawareandlehigh.org/map/>). Let's not just increase the walkability of the Lehigh campus but all of South Bethlehem. This web of interconnectivity, of walking and biking and not dependent on cars, could change the experience living and working in South Bethlehem.

Any vacation of such a large swath of city- (read: citizen-) owned land should be used to create a new relationship between the university and Bethlehem citizens. This land belongs to the citizens of Bethlehem, and figuring out how to knit together this grand university and this dynamic, diverse city should be the framework for any action by City Council.



David Saltzer

There are a multitude of factors to consider when discussing the “hypothetical” building of the pedestrian walkway as part of the Path to Prominence that Lehigh is exploring. When thinking about this and all the talk about walkability in the city, it is a good discussion to have.

However, there are many questions with closing the street and building this walkway. How does this affect emergency responders' access to buildings, residences, and other areas in that location? How will it be paid for: will Lehigh pay for it, will it be built with city funds, are there grants available or will be it a combination of all 3? Who would maintain it, keep it clean, supply the electric for lighting for safety? Who will patrol it — the Lehigh Police, the City Police, or again a combination of both? Assuming there was a study done, what is the amount of foot traffic that would be generated? What is the access to city streets from the walkway and access for emergency responders for any emergencies that would occur on it?

Without any answers to these questions, studies, a plan to look at, or until something actually is brought forth, I feel that this is still in a discussion phase

and will need to continue to be watched and looked at until something formal is presented.



J. William Reynolds (incumbent)

Let me start by saying that this is a great question. Most important decisions should be made using a rational, deliberate process. In no particular order, here is a look at some of the questions that I consider as I am formulating a decision.

- 1) What are the short and term long benefits/potential negative consequences for the proposal?
- 2) Who are the important stakeholders, and how do they feel about the proposal?
- 3) What (if any) are the legal questions surrounding the proposal?
- 4) What is going to happen if the proposal does not go through?
- 5) Who are the internal city staff/professionals that I should be speak to, and how do they feel about the proposal?
- 6) And, yes, how does the proposal “feel”? (Our “feeling” shouldn’t be the only factor but often reflects our comprehensive experience making similar decisions in the past.)

As important as those questions are, it is vital on significant questions of policy to be able to explain your decision-making process publicly. I, personally, like to respond to certain arguments made by the side that I disagree with as a way to show that I have considered the major opposing points in a policy discussion.

It is usually impossible to make everyone happy when policy decisions are made. The goal, however, is to come to conclusions that balance as many of the communal interests as possible while also building faith in the process you undertook to come to your policy position.



Michael Colon (incumbent)

Like most issues that find themselves on the City Council agenda, there are a number of pros and cons that come to mind off the top. Of course, this is still in its early stages granting many unknowns.

Some immediate questions that come to mind for Lehigh: First thing I’d need to know are what are the boundaries of this

project? Packer is many city blocks long. Why should this strip be vacated? Why not extend the proposed walkway? Why not shorten? I'd like to hear from faculty and students about safety. I'm familiar with the area but won't pretend to walk it as much as the students/faculty. Is it perceived as an unsafe environment for pedestrians? Have there been accidents there? Does the current state of the street actually present a boundary to unifying the campus and accessing the community as stated? Are there other alternatives to reaching this goal? If there are alternatives, how feasible are they? Have new bus routes been proposed? How does this tie-in to the new student housing at Packer & Brodhead?

From the City Administration: how do we see this impacting traffic? Will it create a bottleneck of vehicles on Morton and 4th? Will any changes have to be made to the surrounding infrastructure to accommodate the vacation?
For the Bethlehem Parking Authority: what are their overall thoughts on the vacation? How does this elimination of parking spots impact parking? What does the elimination of these meters do to their revenues?

From the community: How do the BASD and Broughal parents feel about the vacation behind the school? Local business owners in the neighborhood? Neighborhood residents?

Question for myself: Given what's known, is this a good project for the community? Often times these are not easy decisions to make. During my first term on Council, I've been on both the majority and minority sides of votes. Each situation is unique, and I will continue to bring an open mind to all issues whether it be this project or the next one.

Carol Ritter

Carol has posted responses to prompts #1 and #2, and Gadfly will post additional responses (and notify) when received.