

Dialogue on development

The Bethlehem Gadfly Climate Action Plan, Environmental Advisory Council, Gadfly's posts, Serious Issues January 21, 2019

(14th in a series on Bethlehem's Climate Action Plan)

Followers will recognize that Gadfly has been fussin' over how to feel about "development."

He is much intrigued over the phrase "socially conscious development" in Council candidate Grace Crampsie Smith's press release and is anxious to hear more about what's behind that phrase.

So he couldn't help but be drawn into the public dialogue between our past mayor Don Cunningham and our present Councilwoman Paige Van Wirt (who is running again) on Amazon, truck traffic, and the growth of warehouses (delightfully termed "sprawl in a box"!).

What Gadfly has seen now several times and really likes in CW Van Wirt is her dismissal of dichotomies. You know, the simplistic either/or kind of thinking that characterizes so many politicians. When she says things like "as if our only choice is between warehouses and economic stagnation," Gadfly's antennae go up and his wings flutter. That's an interstice (good SAT word) he needs to believe in. Yes, maybe we can have significant development with its economic advantages but common-sense and socially conscious development.

PVW's thoughtful piece worthy of attention.

[Don Cunningham, "You can't use Amazon and then complain about truck traffic." Morning Call, January 16, 2019.](#)

Paige Van Wirt, "Lehigh Valley shoulders heavy burden of warehouses." *Morning Call*, January 21, 2019. (online link not available yet, will add later)

YOUR VIEW

Lehigh Valley shoulders heavy burden of warehouses

I am writing in response to Don Cunningham's column, "You can't use Amazon and then complain about truck traffic."

I think characterizing truck traffic in the Lehigh Valley as a consequence of our own dependence on internet retailers such as Amazon is in error. This opinion ducks our responsibility as a region to adequately plan for warehouse expansion that minimizes traffic and environmental impacts, and it disregards the loss of our farmlands to warehousing.



Paige Van Wirt

While I have absolutely no objection to the loss of all-at-hour jobs, many of them are seasonal or part time without benefits. Many include health insurance that doesn't start until six months on the job, is injury-prone, but warehouses.

Additionally, the extent we suffer from truck traffic, poor air quality, and loss of quality of life is not simply due to our own dependence on internet retailers. We are shouldering the burden for a large part of the East Coast, as we have become the de facto warehouse for the eastern seaboard.

So if I decide to seek out a local source of ink refills for my pen, I will still suffer from the truck traffic delivering to the guy in Paramus, N.J., who gets his kibble trucked in from Iowa via the Lehigh Valley.

This transformation of our beautiful farming Valley into a warehouse-laden, truck-choked super-transit center has brought a share of economic improvement to our region.

But it comes at a steep price — air quality, quality of life, and limited upward opportunities from warehouse jobs. What is the ratio of worker injury associated with these jobs, and



The Lehigh Valley, with available land and easy access to the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic regions via interstate highways, has become a destination for many large warehouses for companies such as Amazon.

how good is the health insurance they provide? Are these jobs where people are content to spend years working, without hope of a significant raise or development of a meaningful skill set?

When these same warehouses replace human labor with planned-for automation, residents will still be stuck with trucks — and pollution — but without the jobs. Modern warehouses used by internet retailers are vast buildings, some larger than 1.5 million square foot. Basically sprawl in a box, these structures are sparsely built, servicing dozens of truck bays.

The purpose of warehouses is transit — with little connection to the fabric of life in the communities where they are located. There are also safety concerns as residents share roads not originally designed for semi, and we breathe in unsanitary emissions of deadly, diesel-generated particulates.

Finally, settling for warehousing diverts us from a robust discussion about a different way of growing our economic base, which includes healthy, interrelated industries that create

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growth through relationships — not dead-end warehouses. Warehousing is pretty much the complete opposite of fostering walkability and encouraging healthy communities.

Other communities use economic data to drive decisions that can

mitigate the environmental and quality-of-life impacts of new commercial development, and we should begin a regional attempt to set standards for the warehousing industry.

For instance, Watertown, Mass., recently mandated the installation of solar panels on all new commercial buildings, and even on renovations of buildings over a certain size. Imagine the pollution and energy costs that could be avoided by mandating solar panel installations on top of all those flat, treacherous warehouse roofs.

Truck drivers who can now plug in to solar-powered docking stations while their trucks are being loaded and unloaded, using free energy from the sun to control the temperature in their cabs, can now turn their engines off. This would ensure that the rest of us don't have to suffer from the particulates that killing diesel trucks

otherwise produce. Creative, forward-thinking solutions like this can make a significant impact on air quality in a region beset with transfer stations.

It's easy to point the finger at internet retailers and say the rest of us should consider ourselves lucky, as if our only choice is between warehouses and economic stagnation.

But people who are stuck on Route 22 behind six big rigs, or the mom dealing with yet another asthma attack as her child breathes our air, might find this dismissal of the problem just wrong.

What we should be demanding from our region-wide planners is a path for centralization of the warehouses, so truck traffic impact is minimized, as well as conducting highly localized studies of the particulate burden in our air in order to prevent the sting of my warehouses in constant air pollution hot spots, and creating green standards that specify how warehouses can operate.

Sure, blame us for our own mess. Celebrate low-wage, low-skill jobs. But let's put some thought in how we can improve it.

Paige Van Wirt, a physician, is a member of Bethlehem City Council.

WHERE TO WRITE

Letters to the editor

The Morning Call

Box 240

Allentown, Pa. 18105

Email letters

letusc@morningcall.com

Submit guest columns

townsquare@morningcall.com

Letters are edited for length, clarity and

style and must include your name, address

and telephone number. Letters should not

exceed 200 words.

Guest columns should be on timely topics

and no more than 200 words. Don't ques-

tion to Mike Hirsch, 610-820-6562,

mike.hirsch@morningcall.com.

"You're not allowed to hate what you love and what you use, and then complain about what it [Amazon] creates." (DC)

"I think characterizing truck traffic in the Lehigh Valley as a consequence of our own dependence on internet retailers such as Amazon is in error. This opinion ducks our responsibility as a region to adequately plan for warehouse expansion that minimizes traffic and environmental impacts, and it disregards the loss of our farmlands to warehousing." (PVW)

"If you order products online and have them delivered to your door, you are not allowed to complain about trucks on the road." (DC)

"It's easy to point the finger at internet retailers and say the rest of us should consider ourselves lucky, as if our only choice is between

warehouses and economic stagnation. But people who are stuck on Route 22 behind six big rigs, or the mom dealing with yet another asthma attack as her child breathes our air, might find this dismissal of the problem just wrong.” (PVW)

“People are inherently lazy and love little wrapped gifts and surprises, even if we know what’s in them. So, the idea of sitting on the couch, ordering things and having someone bring them to our door is appealing. Voila, a new industry is created: e-commerce. And, yes, trucks deliver the packages.” (DC)

“Watertown, Mass., recently mandated the installation of solar panels on all new commercial buildings, and even on renovations of buildings over a certain size. Imagine the pollution and energy costs that could be avoided by mandating solar panel installations on top of all those flat, treeless warehouse roofs.” (PVW)

“Nonetheless, we go online, order packages, try on clothes, return them if they don’t fit and have someone carry a new package to our door all the while complaining about the explosion of warehouses in the Lehigh Valley.” (DC)

“What we should be demanding from our region-wide planners is a path for centralization of the warehouses, so truck traffic impact is minimized, as well as conducting highly localized studies of the particulate burden in our air in order to prevent the siting of any warehouses in current air pollution hot spots and creating green standards that specify how warehouses can operate.”

It’s Monday, January 21, do you know where your local Climate Action Plan is?