

Councilwoman Van Wirt on a Polk Street Garage: “the parking needs of the citizens of Bethlehem [are] being forgotten in this quest to build already outdated parking garages” (84)

The Bethlehem Gadfly Parking, Serious Issues July 8, 2019

(84th in a series of posts on parking)

So from what we can tell from responses to the BPA presentation about a Polk Street Garage, only Councilwoman Van Wirt on Council is opposed or, at least, “seriously concerned.” Comments by CPs Callahan and Reynolds showed no signs of dismay. CPs Waldron, Negron, Martell, and Colon were not active comment participants.

So let’s look at PVW’s position again:

1) PVW Facebook July 3

“I have serious concerns about the amount of debt the Bethlehem Parking Authority is contemplating. Currently BPA holds \$25 million in taxpayer-backed bonds and is considering adding \$32 million more in revenue-secured debt to construct Polk Street and replace Walnut Street. These parking garages do not even begin to pay for themselves — they are being carried by increases in metered parking rates which effect our small businesses and health of our downtowns. The primary obligation of the BPA — to serve the parking needs of the citizens of Bethlehem — is being forgotten in this quest to build already outdated parking garages.”

As of this moment, there are 75 comments on PVW's post — all, I believe, supportive. It would be instructive [to go there and browse these comments](#).

One commentator asks PVW to put up — what are her short- and long-term solutions?

Short term: wait to build a garage until the demand for parking mandates a garage. (It's too soft on the southside to mandate a public-built garage). Ask institutional users to pay market rate and not subsidize on the back of meter rates. Implement variable meter rates to better address supply and demand inequity between North and South side. The zoning code for the Polk St garage mandates that development in this district provide it's own parking. If this demand is too severe, look at the zoning code and see if we have overly-mandated parking (ie, let the market solve the parking issue, not the government). In the long run, start having discussions about how to provide transportation alternatives to driving and parking. The days of parking garages being an 'anchor' for development are over. Infill those Steel lots and let the market answer the parking demand problem.

2) [PVW Facebook July 4](#)

The following day PVW posted an article from a professional journal to back up her views: [“The Folly of City-Owned Parking Garages.”](#)

“Guaranteeing cheap downtown parking creates all the wrong incentives for drivers.”

“[There's nothing] to say that a city shouldn't have parking garages. Clearly, the ability to park one's car is valuable. But that's precisely why there are privately owned garages around to create competition. This is a service that can be provided at market prices for a profit.

Alternatively, office developers or retail businesses may construct garages for their own use to encourage customers to show up. The availability of garages does create positive externalities for area businesses, but these can (and often are) re-internalized through deals to provide free or discount parking to people with validation from a nearby retailer. Parking is great—great enough to pay for.”

“But municipal provision of subsidized parking is another thing entirely. For one thing, it’s regressive. In almost every city, regular drivers are richer than transit users. Guaranteeing cheap parking in the city center also has the perverse impact of reducing incentives to live in the city, ensuring suburbanites that they can have convenient access to the center without living in the city limits and contributing to the tax base. And in environmental and congestion terms, it’s the exact reverse of building a train. You’re encouraging bad behavior.”

“Increasingly cities are recognizing that the late 20th century fad of parking subsidies was a mistake. . . . In much the same spirit, cities should seek to divest themselves of parking assets. Don’t contract management of garages out to private firms, sell the garages.”

“Garage-building as a spark for downtown revitalization was a mistake in the first place.”

The article is more about what to do with existing parking garages than with building new ones but clearly indicates that we in Bethlehem are donning a parking style or fashion at one end of a continuum that the planning professionals are shedding at the other end.