



According to its Master Plan, what does Lehigh want to do for, to, and with the City?

The Bethlehem Gadfly Lehigh University, Southside January 31, 2020

 *Latest in a series of posts about Lehigh University and the Southside* 

Why is Gadfly serving up this huge text omelette for your breakfast this morning?

The Mayor said graphically at the January 23 Broughal public meeting on the temporary Packer Ave. closing that he would be “crucified” if he decided to go ahead with the street vacation without providing substantial data and rationale. Crucified. That’s what he said.

Yes.

But Gadfly thinks it’s going to be hard for the Mayor and Council to say no to Lehigh. And that one of the arguments in favor will be that Lehigh does a lot of good for the City.

And thus how can we say no.

So Gadfly is anxious to see how Lehigh describes its relationship with the City — and to see how he feels about it. Is he going to be disposed in Lehigh’s favor? Should he be thinking of Lehigh as a benevolent partner with the City as it moves off The Hill?

Frankly, Gadfly worries about continued “Lehigh sprawl,” and he is the kind of person who walks with the ghosts of the [Lost Neighborhood](#).

And we have to be realistic and acknowledge — as a Gadfly follower just reminded him — that Lehigh looks out for itself.

So let’s see what Lehigh says. Always to the primary sources in Gad-world.

The 2012 Lehigh Master Plan describes three “place-based strategies” in its actions related to the City:

- Area improvement through acquisition or rehabilitation
- Develop a dense mixed-use housing project through partnership
- Participate in a neighborhood improvement district

Remember that the following section of the Lehigh Master Plan would have been written a decade ago and thus might feel or be dated. But Gadfly is interested in the voice, the language with which Lehigh describes its relationship with the Southside.

Goal 3: Participating in the Renaissance of South Bethlehem

Objectives Of The Real Estate Strategy: As an integral part of the Campus Master Plan, and with a focus on implementation, the South Bethlehem real estate strategy is critical for achieving three objectives:

Expanding the quantity and quality of housing options for both undergraduate and graduate students as well as faculty and staff. The Campus Master Plan projects a need for approximately 150-300 graduate beds in new and existing housing and 250 undergraduate beds in new and existing housing.

Promoting economic revitalization of South Bethlehem. Universities across the nation, including Lehigh, have acknowledged the importance of engaging in improving their adjacent urban areas, to improve the quality, enjoyment, and safety related to the off-campus experience for students, faculty, staff, and neighborhood residents.

Creating spaces for additional University activities. The Campus Master Plan identifies key catalytic expansion projects for University programs and administration. As has been the case in other college towns, creation of a facility that can meet University needs while contributing life and vibrancy to the city can be a useful approach to downtown revitalization.

Principles when participating in the renaissance of South Bethlehem in the Campus Master Plan include:

- South Bethlehem should serve as a draw for faculty, staff, and students.
- Work with the local community to build opportunities for mutual benefit.
- Be a presence to help revitalize South Bethlehem.

- Create opportunities for students and faculty to live and work in South Bethlehem.
- Build upon academic strengths to address the issues of a post-modern urban environment: education, health, housing, small merchants, and entrepreneurs.

A Place-Based Strategy: The Campus Master Plan has identified two critical zones for South Bethlehem revitalization through the University's potential intervention. Real estate efforts should be concentrated in these areas as much as possible.

The residential neighborhoods to the east and west of campus include numerous rental units within the older housing stock which serve Lehigh students. A partnership program with local landlords to rehabilitate these areas could both benefit the neighborhood and provide safe and affordable housing for the student population. The core commercial area of South Bethlehem from New Street to Polk Street and from Fourth Street to Third Street is one of the main gateways to campus and a key area for amenities and services that support both campus and community. This area includes the University-owned Service Building [4th and Adams], the South Bethlehem Greenway (a new linear park on the site of a former rail right-of-way), and several City-owned lots along the Greenway that could support new residential and retail uses.

A Partnership-Driven Strategy: The uses critical to a South Bethlehem revitalization strategy are generally those that are produced by market-oriented, private activity including housing, retail, and other commercial uses. In South Bethlehem, economic conditions have made success more difficult. The most efficient use of the University's resources is therefore not always to develop and finance projects outright, but to leverage new activity in South Bethlehem through partnerships between the University, private developers and owners, and the City of Bethlehem. Implementation of the strategies through the partnership approach will nonetheless require a long-term commitment on the part of all partners and stakeholders in the process.

Options For The Housing Strategy: A combination of both "decentralized" and "centralized" approaches will be critical to improving South Bethlehem and the quality of off-campus housing. The University

should aim to implement strategies that are not only maximally catalytic of South Bethlehem revitalization but also produce the desired number of new or improved quality beds for the reasonable University investment. The decentralized approach targets the substantial number of existing off-campus housing units leased by Lehigh students which currently offer sub-par living conditions and are in need of significant rehabilitation as well as a higher quality of management by their owners. To appropriately incentivize the private market to undertake needed investments in these homes for lower cash flow, the gap created by rehabilitation costs and likely rents would need to be closed.

Strategic steps would include identifying priority areas for housing improvement, setting a target for the proportion of housing to be rehabilitated, and partake in partnership opportunities. To offset the gap between rehab investment and likely revenue streams, the most effective approach would be for the University to subsidize purchase and rehabilitation of groups of houses by private parties, achieving the University's goals at the lowest combination of cost and risk. The rehabilitation of a subset of the existing housing supply in the targeted areas would likely alter market dynamics in a manner such that the rest of the stock would be rehabilitated over time in response to changes in demand.

As a more centralized approach, the development of a currently-unoffered product type—multistory housing in an amenitized urban core—will be more attractive to both graduate students, faculty, and staff. The University could support either gap-financing for a multi-unit building built by a private owner/developer, or directly finance a residential building that would provide graduate student housing exclusively. A sizeable development in South Bethlehem would serve as a catalytic project for area growth and improvement.

As with the decentralized approach, the University's goal should be to produce the maximum number of quality units with the minimum investment. However, the need for graduate dormitory housing creates a special case, since there are significant advantages to the University owning or holding a long-term lease for these units.

Service Expansion Strategy: Increasing the student, faculty, and staff population in South Bethlehem would induce increased retail activity and provide additional indirect benefits to the University and the neighborhood. Retail which caters to student needs could also potentially reduce car ownership among students and help reduce the University's parking demand. An increase in retail activity would also add to the eyes-on-the-street factor and improve area safety. Placing retailers strategically between or adjacent to campus and residential areas will increase retail viability and pedestrian activity.

A strategic framework that would increase retail, food and beverage, and entertainment options in South Bethlehem would benefit the immediate area and provide much-needed amenities for the student population. The introduction of more retail space could potentially attract more residents to the immediate area, thus revitalizing the area nearest campus.

Safety And Community Strategy: The potential for South Bethlehem to become an even more vibrant and diverse community that is welcoming to both the students, faculty, and staff of Lehigh, and to local residents, centers around the perception of safety and security in the neighborhood. Adoption of the proposed Bethlehem Neighborhood Improvement District (NID), in which the University would play a key role, would lead to more area improvements in several ways. A Clean and Safe program would enhance neighborhood surroundings and would increase the presence of public safety officers in South Bethlehem. A retail tenant recruitment and storefront improvement strategy would support retail growth. Finally, capital improvements to the public realm would improve the quality of the pedestrian experience and help to activate key streets, building upon the existing successful endeavors in the neighborhood.

University Program Strategy: Lehigh's location within South Bethlehem also creates opportunities for meaningful connections between University programs and community interests, in physical spaces that become "magnets" for campus-community interaction. As at other universities located in urban areas, academic and other programs can support or engage in neighborhood revitalization and generate day, evening, and weekend activity with public programs.

During on campus interviews, faculty and staff prioritized interaction with the community as the most important function of a potential Lehigh development in South Bethlehem. As opportunities arise to strategically embed University functions in the surrounding community, proximity to campus, maximizing available assets, and generating activity should be considered as key characteristics. As an exemplar, the Lehigh-owned Service Building represents these aspirations well.

The Service Building [4th and Adams] was built in 1894 as a cold storage warehouse served by an active rail line. Today, this historic industrial building houses workshops and storage spaces for the University's facilities department. Originally in an industrial area, the building now sits at a location of strategic importance between the East Fourth Street retail corridor and the new South Bethlehem Greenway. While firmly part of the South Bethlehem context, it is only one block from campus along Adams Street. The Service Building could potentially be adaptively reused to create a new landmark and beacon of activity. The historic industrial building has architectural characteristics that could be well-suited for creative uses that would benefit from high ceilings and loft-like spaces. Ground floor spaces along the street, as well as along the Greenway, could engage the community through shared uses and by creating vitality during both day and evening hours to activate the area.

An improved streetscape along Adams Street could provide a safe and well-lit connection to the campus proper. Street improvements and better lighting in South Bethlehem were prioritized by students during on campus interviews. With a number of large redevelopment sites in the immediate area, the Service Building exemplar is envisioned as a catalyst to the revitalization of the core commercial district of South Bethlehem.

to be continued . . .