


Gadfly says Lehigh might want to lock Carolina Hernandez in her office

The Bethlehem Gadfly | Lehigh University, Southside | February 23, 2020

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

Before we look at the interestingly different ways Council voted on the proposal to do a pilot study for closing Packer Ave. between Vine and Webster, let's wrap up by looking once again at Gadfly's stance.

Gadfly is a first premise, first cause, begin-at-the-beginning kind of guy.

He is very often most interested in the "why" kinds of questions.

Lehigh is proposing to close a section of Packer Ave.

Gadfly is neutral on the proposition. He stands to be convinced. As he assumes the Council members should be.

To Gadfly's observations, the conversation about the pilot study moved too swiftly to the details of how a pilot study will be implemented. And that blurs the why question. It assumes the why question has been answered satisfactorily.

For instance, in the initial 4-minute Lehigh presentation at Council last Tuesday (there were four Lehigh speakers), one minute was spent on the reasons for wanting to close Packer, three for how the study will be conducted. Gadfly would reverse the percentages. He would not go to how the study will be done till he was reasonably convinced there was a compelling reason to do it in the first place.

So Gadfly rivets on the question of why Lehigh says it will be a good thing to close Packer.

Recognizing the similarity in the deliberative process so far to the process in which he participated hundreds if not thousands of times over five decades as a writing teacher, Gadfly notes that the Lehigh proposal has gone through three drafts: at the January 23 Broughal meeting, at

the February 4 Council meeting, and last Tuesday at the February 18 Council meeting.

As one would expect, the drafts are somewhat different. As one would hope, the latest draft is somewhat stronger.

But, in Gadfly's mind, the Lehigh proposal is "not there yet." And as a Council member, he wouldn't be ready to accept it, or even to accept the seemingly harmless first step of a free traffic study.

There are three points to Lehigh's case that have shifted somewhat but remained basically the same over the three drafts. In the language of draft #3: 1) pedestrian safety 2) pulling the core of the campus farther in to the Southside 3) an improved pedestrian amenity for the campus and the community at large.

Listen to fussy, crotchety old prof Gadfly at the February 18 Council meeting calling for a yet stronger 4th draft before the Lehigh proposal is in shape to present to Council for their deliberation. (If you want to see fussy, crotchety old prof Gadfly from his best viewing angle — the back — go to the [City video min. 49:45.](#))

Audio Player not available in this archive

1) pedestrian safety: this third draft produced statistics on accidents and injuries at "the crossing" on Packer. But a) the crossing has been there for years. If conditions were so bad, why hasn't the City done something/said something? Where is testimony from the City traffic and safety people? That would have more legitimacy than "partisan" testimony from the Lehigh officer. b) Still nothing addressing less nuclear traffic calming measures. As Gadfly said a few posts back, he feels that possessing that space is the prime reason for the proposal. The other options would not enable closing, would not enable possession of that space. The traffic rationale is a necessary means to possession. Lehigh has, in fact, said several times that safety is not their prime reason for proposing the closing but one of three "overlapping reasons." So what bothers Gadfly is that the pilot *traffic* study is not addressing the main reason for the closing — which is the underdeveloped reason #3.

2) changing the face of Lehigh, pulling the core of the campus closer into the Southside: Sorry, Gadfly is not overpowered by the logic here. Closing Packer is not the same as moving Lehigh offices to the Flatiron building or to 3rd and New. Closing Packer is not the same as funding the Southside Ambassadors. We are talking here about moving the symbolic center of the University from the University Center flagpole/lawn to Packer Ave — about a one minute walk apart. Spitting distance. Gadfly agrees with the Mayor's goal of more University and student involvement in the Southside but doesn't see this move relating in virtually any way to that goal. On its own. But Gadfly must remember that Lehigh is talking not about three separate reasons but about "overlapping reasons," which puts interesting emphasis on their third reason. Read on.

3) an improved pedestrian amenity for the campus and the community at large, providing a safe and welcoming east-west access for the community: go back and [listen to the video of Lehigh's Carolina Hernandez](#), the last of the four Lehigh presenters at last Tuesday's Council meeting. She talked of programs in which Lehigh brings students to campus. Wow! thought Gadfly when he got up to talk — even smacking the podium table over this point (so dramatic, he is). This flips Lehigh reason #2. Not taking campus farther into the Southside. But bringing community members uphill, on to campus. Yes. Yes. Yes. This is the part of the conversation from Lehigh's Tuesday night draft #3 that caught Gadfly's attention — as well as Councilwoman Van Wirt's, as we will see in the next post or so. Yes, yes, yes. Let's think of how this vacated space might be used to blur lines, to bring more Southsiders over physical, symbolic, or emotional (an interesting term used by Lehigh in a past meeting) borders. So Gadfly ended up saying that the most important addition for the 4th draft of Lehigh's proposal would be specific examples of boundary-blurring programming that Lehigh could institute in that space. If I were a Councilperson, such examples would make my mouth water and satisfy my need to consider approving such a proposal *for the public good of the City*. If I were Lehigh, I would lock Carolina Hernandez in her office till she developed two or three specific programs that would turn a vacated Packer Ave. into *a truly shared space*. Put as much detailed thinking about the use of the public space as has been given to the details of the traffic study. (We pretty much know

where every traffic cone is going to go in the traffic study, but we get zero information about reason #3.)

So Gadfly urged Council not to approve the proposal for a traffic study. Yet. Wait for a 4th draft, he said. And then make your decision. (At such moments in conferences asking for a 4th draft, Gadfly had to keep sharp objects away from his students.)

But Council approved it.

Gadfly is not devastated.

The Council rationales were good. The Council rationales were clear. We'll dissect them next. That will be instructive on several levels.

The idea of a test pilot is always good. The urban planning guru Jeff Speck whom Gadfly spent the last summer reading (you might remember he battered you with post after post of Speck's ideas) strongly recommends such when possible.

But Gadfly says we shouldn't think that the results of a test on traffic will touch the main issues here.

And debate about these three rationales will continue if the test pilot passes the test, so the thinking we do here and now is not wasted.

And maybe then Carolina will have been sprung from her office, 4th draft of the proposal in hand.