


Lehigh Valley is at a tipping point, says Future report

The Bethlehem Gadfly Climate Action Plan, Environment, Environmental Advisory Council
December 11, 2019

 *The latest in a series of posts relating to the environment,
Bethlehem's Climate*

Action Plan, and Bethlehem's Environmental Advisory Council 

**The full version of FutureLV: The Regional Plan can be found
at LVPC.org.**

Gadfly suggests that we try to get our heads around these big ideas that are swirling all around us.

When a major report like this comes out, Gadfly wishes that there was some formal public response from our Administration and our planning people to acknowledge the report, to indicate their involvement in and/or awareness of the process that produced it, but especially what it means specifically for us.

Is a report like this shaping thinking and decisions at City Hall?

Some soundbites:

- The Lehigh Valley is at a tipping point.
- The central mission of FutureLV is striking a delicate balance between successful growth and necessary preservation.
- At the heart of the plan is a “centers and corridors” concept that, essentially, recommends building up what’s already been developed.

- It directs new development and redevelopment to 57 activity centers where people live, work, shop or play, and the corridors that connect them.
- It will mean more mixed-use development.
- The plan includes \$2.5 billion in transportation funding for roads, bridges, trails and sidewalks. It's simply not enough.
- Ultimately, it means denser centers. Before anyone curses that D word, know that density is a good thing.
- The thing people liked most about living in the region is its parks, trails and recreation areas, and the number two thing was its farmlands and natural resources. Those things have come to define our character and identity.
- Our environment has become a key part of our identity.

Becky Bradley, "How to strike a balance between growth and preservation." Morning Call, December 1, 2019.

The Lehigh Valley is such a successful region that 4,000 to 6,000 more people arrive every year to take advantage of its unique character, beautiful landscape and high quality of life. But how do we preserve all that good, while managing all that growth? Well, we've been working on that for close to three years. The result of that work — along with input and ideas from literally thousands of people from across Lehigh and Northampton counties — is FutureLV: The Regional Plan.

FutureLV is a blueprint designed to guide the region to 2045 and beyond. The fact is, the Lehigh Valley is at a tipping point. We're not only growing fast in people, but we're developing fast. The e-commerce boom has clearly overheated our warehousing market, but we're also seeing growing development in almost every area, from commercial to residential to industrial. Even brick and mortar retail development continues, despite the ominous threat of online shopping and the

associated “retail apocalypse,” written about by every major financial publication from The Wall Street Journal to Money magazine.

The central mission of FutureLV is striking a delicate balance between successful growth and necessary preservation.

At the heart of the plan is a “centers and corridors” concept that, essentially, recommends building up what’s already been developed. It means taking advantage of the sewer, water, road, gas, electric, technology and building infrastructure that’s already built. It directs new development and redevelopment to 57 activity centers where people live, work, shop or play, and the corridors that connect them. These range from downtown Allentown to Portland’s business district to Madison Farms in Bethlehem Township.

It will mean more mixed-use development where residential, commercial and retail can co-exist, more walkable neighborhoods where pedestrians, bicyclists and people with disabilities don’t feel unsafe crossing an intersection, more bike and bus lanes and a more connected transportation system.

The plan includes \$2.5 billion in transportation funding for roads, bridges, trails and sidewalks. It’s simply not enough. We’ve already identified \$4 billion in projects that need done, but aren’t funded. So, we’ll have to be creative and efficient in spending the money we have, while working hard to improve that funding picture.

Ultimately, it means denser centers. Before anyone curses that D word, know that density is a good thing. It puts activity and foot traffic where our neighborhoods and businesses need it most. It will also make our public transit network more efficient and, in the long run, might even be the ticket to light rail.

More importantly, it will save us from ourselves. It will keep us from building homes, big box stores and, yes, warehouses on farm fields or

open space or along roads where they don't make sense, economically or otherwise.

So why is saving the environment important to saving the Lehigh Valley? Two reasons out of a thousand: People told us it is, and it adds value to our economy and region as a whole.

In a survey taken by nearly 1,100 residents last year, the thing people liked most about living in the region is its parks, trails and recreation areas, and the number two thing was its farmlands and natural resources. Those things have come to define our character and identity and are why thousands of people every day drive long distances from jobs to get back here.

But more importantly, saving our environment and making the region more resilient makes sense, and dollars and cents. Our Return on Environment report in 2014 showed that our environment — trees, streams, open space and more — returned more than \$1 billion a year in value in the form of reduced health care costs, cleaner air and water and in general a more livable environment. The point is, our environment has become a key part of our identity. Saving it is just as important as growing our economy, maintaining our roads and providing every Lehigh Valley resident with an opportunity for a good life.

It's Wednesday, December 11, do you know where your local Climate Action Plan is?