



Demand that Lehigh make a strong case for closing Packer Ave.

The Bethlehem Gadfly Lehigh University, Southside February 1, 2020

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

Gadfly walks with the ghosts of the [lost neighborhood](#)

Well, that might be true. But life goes on.

At the January 23 Broughal meeting, Lehigh did not say what would happen to a vacated Packer Avenue between Vine and Webster. However, in a [May 2019 report](#) the area would be turned into the “Packer Promenade.” It’s a sure bet that a “Packer Promenade” is what Lehigh would like. Gadfly bets as well that the result would be beautiful. The 2019 report and the 2012 Master Plan reference such classic projects as Locust Walk at the University of Pennsylvania as models. And Lehigh itself has already done laudable work on campus turning roads into walks. Gadfly can imagine marveling at a final product on the vacated Packer Avenue that would add to the beauty of the Lehigh campus.

Gadfly may be the only one walking with the ghosts of the lost neighborhood. The contentious history of neighborhood-university conflicts in the 1960s and 1970s and the squabbles in the 1990s referenced in the previous post may only be vestigial memory — the warriors long gone, the current nearby residents perhaps unconcerned and passive (has the growth of off-campus student housing widened the radius of single-family homes far from the University flagpole?). Certainly there was no significant turn-out of residents at the Broughal meeting.

Gadfly not only walks with the ghosts of the lost neighborhood, but he has consistently walked in solidarity with homeowners and neighborhoods menaced by developers and other “outside” forces. Gadflies are by nature suspicious of the motives of people and organizations with money, power, influence. It “pays” to be careful in such situations.

So, before we have a vacated and promenade'd Packer, we must demand that Lehigh make a strong case.

Here are the reasons Lehigh gave for vacating the section of Packer at the January 23 Broughal meeting.

Why the Temporary Closure?

A test of the feasibility of closing the portion of Packer Avenue from Webster Street to Vine Street

- *Enhance Safety*
- *Better connect Lehigh with South Bethlehem to have more traffic supporting the businesses*
- *Improve the pedestrian experience for everyone walking across Packer Avenue*

First, we should remember that the Mayor introduced the meeting by saying that he has worked very hard to have what is now an excellent relationship with Lehigh, that he has a goal to get Lehigh off campus and to have more students in the community, that Lehigh has indeed moved into the Southside, and that he wants the very good working relationship with Lehigh to continue. Though the Mayor firmly stressed that he has not made a decision about Packer, it seems clear that he is disposed to work with Lehigh, that his ear is open to their request.

The main purpose of the meeting was to elicit audience comments, so, unfortunately, [Lehigh's three-point introductory rationale](#) for closing Packer was not developed at length. The only elaboration beyond those introductory remarks was this rather off-point response [to a specific question](#) about the three bullet-points.

Gadfly finds this approach a bit of cart-before-the-horse. We are asked to approve a pilot study before agreement on the end product itself. If Lehigh persuaded us that their idea was a good one, then it would make

sense to do a feasibility study. Now we are doing a feasibility study for something we haven't been convinced is a good idea.

Think of the Lehigh river pedestrian bridge. There was discussion and general consensus it is a good idea before a feasibility study was initiated.

It cannot be said that the university has presented so consensus-compelling an argument for closing a portion of an important east-west street that initiating a traffic study would be a natural next step.

We need compelling argument.

Of what would such compelling argument consist? Join with Gadfly in thinking this through a bit.

Enhancing safety:

- One of the three reasons for closing Packer is Lehigh's concern for the safety of its students, faculty, and staff.
- We are told that there is one huge crossing point at peak hours on Packer and that it is particularly bad at dusk.
- What is the basis for considering this portion of Packer unsafe for pedestrians?
- Accidents? Injuries? If so, what does the data show? Exactly how unsafe is it?
- If the data reveals a significant safety issue for pedestrians that must be addressed, what are the possible remedies?
- One might think of three categories of remedies: traffic calming, re-routing the pedestrian flow, closing the street.
- Traffic calming options include a stop light, a stop sign, a crossing guard at peak hours, a crosswalk, a crosswalk with a push-button light signal, sidewalk lighting to illuminate pedestrians at dusk or night, bump outs, speed bumps, narrowing the street, and so forth.
- A pedestrian bridge would route students safely over the road.
- A 3-foot wall or a landscaping barrier running along Packer might discourage promiscuous mid-block crossings and route pedestrians to safe crossing areas.

- Street closing seems logically a last resort, a nuclear option.
- Why was the nuclear option chosen as the first and best option?
- Were any other options tested?
- Granted, one would wish for no accidents or injuries on Packer, but how does one balance the incidence of such accidents/injuries now shown by the data with inconvenience to the general public and the possibility of creating unsafe conditions elsewhere?
- Regarding safety concerns elsewhere, what, for instance, would be the impact on Broughal and on the intersection of Morton and New, which might be an even trickier intersection than it is now because of changes planned as part of the “South New Street Streetscape Enhancement” project?

Better connecting Lehigh with South Bethlehem to have more [foot] traffic supporting the businesses:

- The second of three reasons for closing Packer is to better integrate Lehigh with the City, to put Lehigh closer to the community, and specifically to help local businesses by breaking down a once real but now emotional border and joining in the in-progress shift of the university center of gravity closer to the Southside.
- Encouraging Lehigh people to support local businesses is a laudable goal.
- But exactly how would closing Packer create more foot traffic on, say, 4th St.?
- Is there something about how Packer is now constituted that impedes students from making their way to, say, 4th St.?
- The pool of students available to patronize Southside businesses wouldn't increase by closing Packer, would it? So exactly how would closing Packer create more foot traffic?
- The vacated Packer might most likely be turned in to a space encouraging students to sit, to gather, to stroll longitudinally –that is, to linger — rather than to walk on by, so how would that increase traffic to, say, 4th St.?
- Experience indicates that there are already plenty of students “down-campus” because of the classroom buildings, the library, the

bookstore, the ice cream store, Saxby's, the Campus Square plaza, the Farrington dorms — how would closing Packer bring more or encourage the ones already there to do more shopping?

- Wouldn't a better question be how to get the already down-campus students to cross Morton and go one more block to the business district?
- Aren't the nature of the businesses and services on the Southside what draws traffic? If we want more students there, more or different business magnets might seem a more powerful draw.
- Would the erasure of the now just emotional Packer border simply shift the real border to Morton? To erase a border completely, Morton might be closed and the Campus Square plaza extended invitingly to 4th St.
- Morton and New, virtually touching the Southside business district, is a Lehigh bus junction point, and bus service goes down virtually to 3rd St. — is bus service not a more logical way to accomplish this goal? Students from anywhere on campus have readily available bus service to the Southside.
- Is the hill an obstacle to increased student traffic on, say, 4th St.? For if you walk down, you must walk back up. Pretty steep. Ugh. Maybe having to walk back up is a discouraging bummer for students. And maybe once down-campus, students are not bus-people or are too impatient to wait for a bus that, once boarded, makes a circuitous, time-wasting route back to their up-campus destinations — so how about an innovative tram system that speedily goes straight up the gut of the campus from Campus Square to the University Center? (*Ha! Whoa, Gadfly, whoa! Down boy!*)

Improving the pedestrian experience for everyone walking across Packer Avenue:

- It's clear from the Lehigh representative's presentation at the Broughal meeting that this reason should read "along" not "across" Packer.
- The third of three reasons for closing Packer is to improve the pedestrian experience for everyone walking *along* Packer Avenue.

- That is, Gadfly feels, is to create the “Packer Promenade” of the [May 2019 study](#) done by a Lehigh class that, as we understood it at the EAC meeting, was commissioned by the Lehigh administration.
- Such a promenade could be a stunning addition to an already beautiful campus.
- But exactly what value would such a promenade have to the outside Bethlehem community as to warrant closing a street?
- The Lehigh representative would not admit that the promenade was Lehigh’s real desire.
- The Lehigh representative did not prioritize the three reasons for closing Packer but, rather, suggested/implied a mutuality , a synergy among them.
- But Gadfly feels a promenade is Lehigh’s main reason for seeking the closure of Packer.
- And the reason where the City (“we”) must put our focus.
- This reason, while the most important, seems the vaguest and softest and weakest of the three as presented so far.
- The vast majority of the “everyones” walking along the vacated Packer Avenue will be Lehigh people.
- We can see the value of a promenade to the university.
- Exactly what is the evidence, the argument that a promenade will have value to the neighborhoods around Lehigh and to the City at large to warrant sacrificing a street?
- Gotta hear more.

Even though Lehigh will probably tote the cost of all or almost all of the traffic study, there will be some traffic turbulence, and, frankly, Gadfly thinks that if he were a Councilperson, he would not vote to approve this seemingly harmless pilot study at the February 18 meeting without some more serious discussion and consensus building.

Gadfly is not sure the idea of closing this section of Packer passes the threshold of possible acceptance as presented so far.