



The contentious history of attempts to close Packer Avenue

The Bethlehem Gadfly Lehigh University, Southside January 31, 2020

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

*“We cannot stand still.”
Lehigh representative Charles Seidle, 1965*

*“The foolish destruction of a whole community to appease a nontaxpaying institution.”
Southside resident Anne Pongracz, 1965*

*“There is no support in Council now or ever to close the street.”
City Councilman Paul Calvo, 1976*

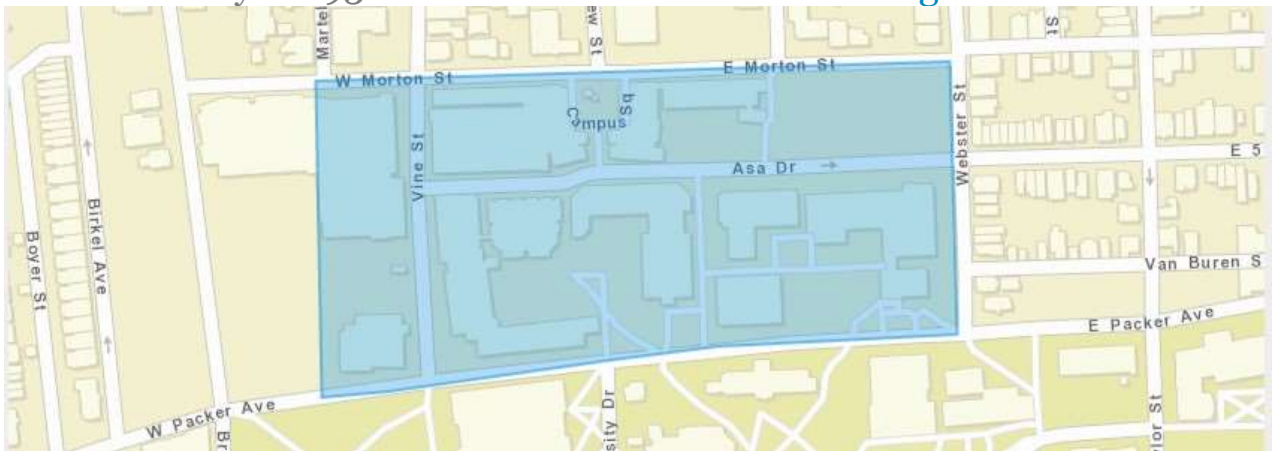
*“The university has looked at Packer Avenue with envious eyes for a long time.”
Lehigh representative and former Bethlehem mayor Ken Smith, 1999*

*“As long as I’m on Council, I will never, never, never agree to let them have Packer.”
City Councilwoman Jean Belinski, 1999*

*“Maybe when that road needs \$500,000 in improvements, they’d be willing to talk.”
Lehigh representative and former Bethlehem mayor Ken Smith, 1999*

- City Council creates Packer Ave. September 1, 1891 (info thanks to Gadfly #1 Stephen Antalics)
- There once was a neighborhood here in the precise area bounded by the traffic study: “During the 1950s, the neighborhood between Packer Ave, Martel, Morton and Webster Streets was a bustling

community” of 93 families. It is now “The Lost Neighborhood.”



- Maintaining that it has “a continuing interest in the economic, social and cultural welfare of the City, ” Lehigh argues, as reported in the *Morning Call* June 29, 1965, that “We cannot stand still” and advocates expansion to the north side of Packer Ave. as an example of the “mutual benefit” from university-city cooperation “to continue progress of our city.”
- As reported in the same article, legendary Southside resident advocate Anne Pongracz called Lehigh a “do-nothing landlord” and called the urban renewal program “the foolish destruction of a whole community to appease a nontaxpaying institution.”

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- The *Morning Call* of April 16, 1967, notes that the Bethlehem Redevelopment Authority is petitioning to vacate Adams St. between Morton and Packer and “at a later date” will petition to vacate Packer from Adams to Vine.
- The *Morning Call* of June 21, 1976, shows legendary City Councilman Paul Calvo confronting Lehigh over Packer Avenue. In its mid-60s master plan, Lehigh shows Packer between Vine and Webster as part of the campus since it owns all the property on both sides. Lehigh says that it has no plans to ask for a vacation “in the foreseeable future” and “we are not asking to have it closed.” But the possibility is still there. Campus expansion is a “political football,” with City officials periodically stressing the need for “stopping the university” from “squeezing out the South Side.”

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- The *Morning Call* of July 1, 1976, reports that Councilman Calvo tells Lehigh “there is no support in Council now or ever to close the street” and that Lehigh has nothing to gain from trying to do it “except a lot of bad feeling in the community.” For its part, Lehigh says there is no economic advantage for them to do it anyway. Control of parking seems to be Lehigh’s issue.

Packer Ave 7 1 76

- The issue is parking as the May 25, 1999, *Morning Call* shows. Lehigh admits “the university has looked at Packer Avenue with envious eyes for a long time.” We’ve talked about it quietly,” but now City Council action “makes it too emotional to even consider it.” “Council members argued that Lehigh was being “unfairly favored over South Side residents” in regard to a parking program. Councilwoman Jean Belinski says, “that’s an emergency route through the South Side. As long as I’m on Council, I will never, never, never agree to let them have Packer.” To which Lehigh retorts, “Maybe when that road needs \$500,000 in improvements, they’d be willing to talk.”

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to be continued . . .