

Lehigh picks place to build 400-bed dorm in south Bethlehem



Lehigh University is planning a major expansion that would include 1,000 more undergraduates and up to 800 more full-time graduate students to the Bethlehem school.



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Where Lehigh is planning to build 400-bed dorm

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Lehigh University's major expansion will feature a dormitory across the street from Broughal Middle School, putting at least 400 upperclassmen within blocks of the historic South Side Business District in a couple of years.

Expected to open July 2019, the residential project could feature dorm rooms, social and learning spaces, communal kitchens and space for movies, games and other diversions at the northwest corner of West Packer

and Brodhead avenues, Lehigh spokeswoman Lori Friedman said Monday.

The 60 Lehigh employees who work in buildings on the property now would be moved to offices under construction at the future Gateway at Greenway Park, at New and Third streets. The buildings on Brodhead would be demolished to make way for the new dorms.

The dorm project, which has yet to be submitted for city review, is the first new construction Lehigh officials have discussed since October, when university President John Simon announced the major expansion.

Under details of the "Pathway to Prominence" expansion plan, Lehigh would add 1,000 undergraduates and 500 to 800 full-time graduate students over a seven-year period. The school now has 5,080 undergraduates and 1,979 graduate students, according to its website.

The plan also calls for the creation of a new College of Health and the construction of a new science and research center.

The dorm is part of Lehigh's comprehensive housing master plan. Adrienne Washington, Lehigh's assistant vice president of community and regional affairs, said the university is explaining the project to local stakeholders and will likely hold a community meeting.

While the plan is not completed, Washington said the residential expansion will include renovating and upgrading existing dorms and providing additional housing on campus.

Washington said Lehigh is not buying additional land for dorms and has enough room on campus to accommodate the students. The plan is to house 70 percent of the undergraduates on campus. Right now, about 65 percent live on campus.

In recent years, the university has purchased small homes, including a couple on Summit Avenue, for the purposes of encouraging faculty members to live on the South Side, Washington said. The university is planning to hire another 100 faculty members to accommodate the growing student enrollment and bolster Lehigh's reputation as a research institution. Lehigh now has 521 professors, 65 percent of whom are tenured.

Friedman, the university spokeswoman, said the expansion underscores the commitment Lehigh has to the South Side and the university's success is "inextricably tied to the vibrancy of south Bethlehem."

"We continue to find opportunities for the campus community to further engage in the South Side in an effort to boost the economic vitality in the area," Friedman said.

Mayor Robert Donchez, who has been meeting with Lehigh officials about the project, said the scope of the dorm project dovetails with the office and commercial development going on a few blocks away at New and Third streets, and will put more people in the backyards of businesses.

"Over the next three to six years, we're going to be seeing some significant changes in south Bethlehem as it continues to develop into a dynamic place for people to live and work," Donchez said.

Roger Hudak, longtime city resident and chairman of the South Side Task Force, applauded the location.

"Great," Hudak said. "There will be a lot more of the kids coming down off the mountain and that will be good for the downtown."

The biggest issue, Hudak said, will be how Lehigh deals with parking. While Lehigh will be keeping some parking at the lot on Brodhead, Hudak surmised the need will be far greater with at least 400 students.

The parking authority is building a 626-spot garage a few blocks away near New and Third streets. And Lehigh is planning to add remote parking on the Mountaintop and Goodman campus and invest in its transit system, including a new electric bus, Friedman said.

Dana Grubb, a past president of the South Bethlehem Historical Society, said he hopes that Lehigh's future dorm will reflect some of the South Side's history, even if it is built just outside the business district that grew up around Bethlehem Steel.

"It would be nice if the architectural elements in the South Side were incorporated into the building," Grubb said, noting the handsome architecture at the Flatiron building at the Five Points intersection.

Bethlehem Area School District Superintendent Joseph Roy said he was happy to see Lehigh expanding because of the economic spinoff, but it would have little effect on Broughal, which is already surrounded by Lehigh's campus.

He said Lehigh students are already very involved in volunteering at the district and expected the only difference would be that the students would have a shorter distance to walk.

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