



LEHIGH VALLEY NEWS



Opposing views frame Bethlehem parking garage debate

Mayor supports proposed garage



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A city economic revitalization tool or corporate welfare?

It depends on who in Bethlehem you ask.

Mayor Robert Donchez is all-in on supporting the Bethlehem Parking Authority's plan to build a new 626-space South Side parking garage at the intersection of Third and New streets.

During Wednesday night's City Council Finance Committee meeting, the mayor said if the garage isn't built, the expansion plans of St. Luke's Hospital and Lehigh University in the neighborhood would disappear.

"Without the garage there would be no commitment," Donchez said, "that's the reality of the situation."

St. Luke's and Lehigh officials seconded that analysis Wednesday night. Both entities would inhabit offices that would anchor a building that would be supported by the garage.

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The Authority would fund the project with a combination of new tax-exempt and taxable bonds as well as \$5.2 million in RACP grant proceeds. A total of \$17,435,000 of guaranteed parking system revenue bonds would be used to fund the garage construction, according to a presentation Wednesday night by Scott Shearer, managing director of Public Financial Management, Inc. on behalf of the BPA.

The garage would mean an additional \$1.1 million of annual debt payments that would be the responsibility of the Parking Authority.

Council is scheduled to vote whether or not to guarantee the debt April 19. If approved, construction should start in June and be completed by May 2017.

Critics of the plan who attended Wednesday night's meeting said the project doesn't actually help the South Side as much as it helps developer Dennis Benner.

"Most of it is going to him, not the public," said Breena Holland during a public comment session. "It is being constructed for him."

Another objector, Al Wurth, questioned why the BPA would invest in the project that in his estimation does not have the best interest of the city at heart.

"Only municipalities are dumb enough to invest in this," he said. "This garage plan is really a turkey...it is a sure loser."

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