

Breena Holland: South Bethlehem doesn't need a new parking garage

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The Bethlehem Parking Authority has finally released the often-cited, but remarkably unavailable, study justifying the city's plans to invest \$17.75 million in a six-story, 626-space parking garage just south of the Greenway, which will cover the entire block on the west side of New Street from the existing small parking lot to Vine Street.

According to the mayor's Director of Community and Economic Development Alicia Karner, the size of the garage — and hence the exorbitant cost to parkers and taxpayers — "is largely driven by the [parking] demand of the area." What she did not explain is that the vast majority of the predicted demand stems from two projects proposed by developer Dennis Benner, neither of which yet has full approval from the Bethlehem Planning Commission.

Mayor Donchez's support for this project reveals a troubling eagerness to subsidize Benner's development projects by allowing the developer to offload more than \$17 million onto taxpayers and those who bear the burden of already rising parking fees. Aside from Benner's having made campaign contributions to city candidates — he or his sons donated more than a total of \$7,500 to the mayor and two city councilmen — there are a number of reasons to question the city's approval and financial backing of this project.

First, Bethlehem citizens should not be subsidizing parking for commercial and residential tenants from whom Benner plans to make a profit. Corporate welfare comes in many forms, and one of them is a government-subsidized parking garage.

Second, the city's parking demand analysis assumes "that 300 feet is the maximum walking distance that the average person would consider reasonable" to reach the building at Third and New streets. In contrast, parking designers usually consider that employee parking generally assumes a reasonable walking distance of four times that length (1,200-1,500 feet, or roughly one-quarter a mile), according to a 2008 article published in the National Parking Association magazine.

The problem with the parking study's assumption that people can walk only 300 feet to get to their destination is that it puts the availability of existing parking spaces on south Bethlehem in many nearby and underused parking lots outside the boundaries of the selected study area.

If the analysis instead assumed that employees from the tenants — St. Luke's University Health Network and Lehigh University — were capable of walking from one to four short blocks to get to work (rather than only 300 feet), it would arrive at an entirely different projected parking demand, one that could easily be met by

improving walkability and transportation options and for far less than \$17.75 million.

In reality, there is not a parking demand or availability problem in south Bethlehem. What we have is a parking management problem.

I mean this in two ways.

First, there is plenty of parking in south Bethlehem. The parking study notes that that nearly half of on-street parking spaces and nearly two-thirds of off-street parking spaces near the proposed garage sit vacant during peak hours. If 264 off-street parking spaces are already available in proximity to the proposed garage, and if Benner's building only needs 300 spaces, then the real demand for his building is less than 50 spaces.

This can easily be met by the large amount of off-street parking close to the building in lots that border the unexplained boundary of the Bethlehem Parking Authority's study area; the Parking Authority just needs to figure out how to manage these parking spaces and improve the pedestrian's experience getting to and from them.

Second, it might indeed be easier for the Parking Authority to spend more than \$17 million on a large capital investment project characteristic of 20th century urban planning rather than to figure out how to follow many other cities into the 21st century by setting up rapid shuttle and multimodal transport systems.

However, this simply suggests we need new management at the Parking Authority, not a new parking garage.

Breena Holland, an associate professor in the department of political science and the environmental initiative at Lehigh University, is director of Lehigh's South Side Initiative and author of "Allocating the Earth."