

South Bethlehem garage: smart or 'absurd' investment?



Bethlehem policymakers this week will debate construction of a \$17 million parking deck adjacent to a building planned for S. New and Third streets. (HOWARD KULP ARCHITECTS / CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)



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BETHLEHEM — When he looks at the New Street garage renderings, Bethlehem Mayor **Robert Donchez** sees the future — a place for 626 people to park while they work or shop near the blue-collar neighborhood where he grew up.

When Lehigh University professor Breena Holland looks at it, she sees an expensive, "out-of-scale" deck that does nothing to preserve the character of the historic downtown that grew around Bethlehem Steel, nor to build the type of walkable, urban environment millennials desire.

It's an academic debate that will be put to a real-world test Wednesday, when a City Council committee

discusses whether to guarantee the debt needed to build the \$17.75 million garage along the Greenway park at Graham Place.

Council telegraphed earlier this year that it backs the garage, voting 6-1 in January to approve the design for the structure in the historic district. But critics, armed with a recent parking study, say Council should rethink the issue.

At the heart of the debate is a proposed \$20 million building that would grow from where the Southside Burger Co. restaurant once stood near the foot of the Fahy Bridge. The property, 2 W. Third St., has been vacant since the restaurant was demolished six years ago after a fire, and now is in the coveted City Revitalization and Improvement Zone.

Developer Dennis Benner and his sons want to build a six-story structure that will stretch down New Street and wrap around the corner of Third Street. It would include first-floor retail and offices anchored by St. Luke's University Health Network and by Lehigh University.

But the linchpin, Benner said, is having a garage attached by elevated walkways. Without it, Benner said he would be unable to land his anchor tenants and the project would have to be shelved.

"Unequivocally, I would not be able to get them, nor could I get any other tenant," he said.

A Bethlehem Parking Authority study, obtained by The Morning Call under Pennsylvania's Right-to-Know Law, lays out the parking demand in that section of the South Side.

The office project would require 330 spots initially. And if student housing and retail projects being discussed materialize on East Fourth Street, the Desman Design Management of New York study says, there would be a need for another 380 spots on weekdays.

Today there aren't enough spaces within walking distance even for the office project, the study says. During peak hours just 40 spots are open within 300 feet, it says.

Holland, director of Lehigh's South Side Initiative, said people are willing to walk farther when parking for work than for retail stops, so a broader area should be considered. The underused Lehigh Riverport garage and other lots would be sufficient, she believes, saying up to 500 on- and off-street spaces can be found in an area bound by the Lehigh River and Packer Avenue and Webster Street to Montclair Avenue.

Or, Holland suggested, the parking authority could invest in a rapid shuttle to move people around town.

"In 20 years, these parking lots will be a thing of past," Holland said. "Millennials don't want cars. They want to live in an urban environment, public transportation area. We're not preparing for the future very well

here."

Alicia Miller Karner, city director of community and economic development, said she thinks trolleys are a great amenity, but they won't replace a parking deck.

"We want to make a dense urban community," Karner said. "The reality is people, in this region, are not giving up their cars."

Resident Al Wurth, a Lehigh professor, argued that the garage, which will cost the authority \$1.16 million a year in debt payments, won't be able to pay for itself. That will cause the parking authority's entire operations to make up the difference.

"This is a big, big white elephant, a money loser," he said.

Benner said he is not getting special treatment and will lease spaces the building's tenants will use.

To prepare for the garage and other upcoming capital expenses at the Walnut Street Garage, the authority last month raised rates in its garages and off-street lots. Among the new fees, hourly parking in the garages will increase by a quarter to \$1, and daily rates will rise from \$6 to \$10.

Even with those increases, Desman's consulting study forecasts that the parking authority's income won't be able to cover all of the authority's expenses by 2020, forcing the authority to dip into cash reserves. Those reserves run out by 2029.

Kevin Livingston, authority executive director, said the agency hopes for additional revenue after the garage is built, and that money would be used to help pay the deficit. Current income projects are conservative, he said, and do not factor in future South Side development.

The mayor said more development is expected in the area, including an expansion at the Banana Factory and other private investment.

Resident Kim Carrell-Smith, a Lehigh professor, questioned how city council could support a garage for an office project yet to be approved by the Planning Commission and lacking public plans for its residential component.

"It's a \$17,750,000 parking garage that is designed to support the dreams of one guy," she said.

City Councilman Bryan Callahan, finance committee chairman and liaison to the parking authority, called the garage an investment in the future of the South Side. It will allow Benner to move forward on the office building, bringing foot traffic and new businesses catering to their workers and, in turn, attract more businesses to the South Side.

Council will take up the debate Wednesday at a Finance Committee meeting. The Planning Commission is scheduled Thursday to review plans for Benner's office project and the garage.

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