

South Side Bethlehem parking garage plans approved



By [Sara K. Satullo](#) | For [lehighvalleylive.com](#)

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Plans for a [controversial 626-space](#) South Side [Bethlehem](#) parking garage cleared major hurdles Thursday night.

The city planning commission voted 4-1 to approved the development plans for the garage as well as the vacation of Graham Street from New to Vine streets.

Now, the [Bethlehem Parking Authority](#) just needs [city council](#) to agree to back the bonds it must take out to build the garage. The authority hopes to begin construction in June and open the deck in May of 2017.

Resident opposition to the project Thursday night centered around the added traffic the project will bring to the already congested South Side neighborhood.

"I'm not sure there's a worse place to put a parking garage," resident Al Wurth said. "... This does not sound like a sensible plan. This sounds like a recipe for disaster."

Residents also dislike the design of a three-story pedestrian bridge spanning from the garage to [Dennis Benner's](#) Greenway Park building, which the commission also approved Thursday.



Benner's 6-story South Side Bethlehem building a go



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The development brings retail back to a prominent corner at the foot of the Fahy Bridge in the heart of South Side.

The \$17.75 million deck would be built at New Street and Graham Place, although a portion of Graham is being eliminated to make way for the deck. The first floor will include a Bethlehem police substation and a small parking authority office.

Many residents are concerned that the loss of a traffic shortcut on Graham Place will further exacerbate existing back-ups on New Street. It is already difficult to turn onto Broadhead Avenue from Graham.

"It's obviously going to add more traffic to the area," Tiffany Wells, city traffic superintendent, said of the garage.

Cars from the garage will be able to enter and exit the garage on South New Street and also exit onto Vine Street, which will be changed from one-way south to one-way north, funneling traffic onto Graham Place.

Some residents suggested making Vine Street open to two-way traffic.

On New Street, the garage will have an entrance and an exit and one reversible lane to ease traffic jams.

The city is working to try to mitigate the traffic impact of the garage, said Darlene Heller, city planning director.

Graham Place resident William Seixas said there is already limited parking on the block and it would be nice if residents could be given spots in the garage. He has four children and is concerned about the traffic and pollution the deck will bring.

The public garage is going to be largely used by the main tenants of Greenway Park, [Lehigh University](#) and [St. Luke's](#) workers, who will have monthly passes that allow them to quickly enter the garage, said Rick Roseberry, of the engineering firm Maser Consulting.

Seixas is disappointed that the vacation of Graham Place makes it impossible to walk directly to New Street or the Greenway because there will be a gully alongside the garage.

The South Bethlehem Greenway is losing about 1,200-square-foot of space to the garage but it will gain added land further up the path through a portion of parking lot the Comfort Suites hotel is giving up, Heller said.

Hotel manager Dave Urban said it is giving up a key entrance to its parking lot, which will exacerbate existing parking issues. The hotel is considering adding a Third Street entrance.

"We're spending a tremendous amount of money to do this," Urban said.

Lehigh's South Side Initiative chair Breena Holland lamented that the garage's stairwells and exits don't help funnel foot traffic to businesses on Third and Fourth streets.

There will be pedestrian exits at the corner of Vine and Rink streets and at New Street and the South Bethlehem Greenway.

Molly's Irish Grille and Sports Pub owner Charles Patrick said he supports the deck. He often hears parking is a deterrent for customers coming in.

WHAT'S NEXT

Council is scheduled to take its first vote on the project's bonds April 19 and a second vote May 3. The city is scheduling a public meeting for the public to ask questions about the South Side Bethlehem parking feasibility study.

Sara K. Satullo may be reached at ssatullo@lehighvalleylive.com.com. Follow her on Twitter [@sarasatullo](#). Find [lehighvalleylive.com on Facebook](#).

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