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Work could start next spring on south Bethlehem parking garage



By **Nicole Radziewich** · **Contact Reporter**
Of The Morning Call

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South Bethlehem parking garage could be under construction next year

DECEMBER 2, 2015, 7:46 PM

BETHLEHEM — A \$17 million parking garage in south Bethlehem could be under construction by April, readying 629 spots to alleviate a parking crunch and provide spaces for some marquee redevelopment projects being pitched on the South Side.

The Bethlehem Parking Authority on Wednesday awarded nearly \$1 million worth of contracts for civil and environmental engineering, architecture and construction management services for the garage adjacent to Graham Place between South New and Third streets.

That's a stone's throw from the millions of dollars' worth of residential, office and retail projects being pitched along Third and Fourth streets as part of a powerful tax incentive district, the City Revitalization and Improvement Zone.

Some South Side merchants have indicated the need for more parking to lure more people to dine and shop in that section of the downtown, which is just a couple of blocks from Lehigh University. The neighborhood mostly features metered parking, including a garage tucked inside Lehigh Riverport, closer to the Fahy Bridge.

Article continues below ↓

"There's actually a lot of parking in the South Side; it's just not in the right spot," said Joseph Hoffmeier, chairman of the Parking Authority. "This deck, I think, puts it in the right spot. It puts it at a main thoroughfare at the corner of Third and New."

Parking officials expect to execute the professional contracts by the end of the year and begin demolition soon after. The garage would be on property the city acquired two years ago. The land

includes some boarded-up houses.

Under the contracts, the authority would hire Boyle Construction Inc. of Allentown as construction manager at a cost of \$660,000. Other professional contracts were awarded to Desman Design Management of New York, Maser Consulting of Bethlehem and Advantage Engineers of Allentown.

The project is to be paid with a \$5.2 million state grant and parking revenue. The authority has not yet executed the financing for it.

Kevin Livingston, executive director of the Parking Authority, said he would not "oversell" the garage to tenants or employees of the downtown, saying there will always be spots set aside for visitors.

Parking officials are tweaking the concept for a garage they had envisioned just a couple of years ago. The garage will not feature ground-floor retail as originally considered, making room for an additional 70 parking spaces and a police substation. There is also to be a connection to a building being planned at the corner.

The city has been eyeing that key intersection for redevelopment since 2009, when a fire broke out at 2 W. Third St., then the Southside Burger Co., formerly Greekers and before that, Third Street Chicken & Ribs. The building, deemed unsafe, was razed and became a parking lot that developers have been eyeing as a prominent location.

No land development plans have been filed for the site, but developer Dennis Benner in the spring submitted a proposal to the city's historic board for a seven-story building there.

Around the corner at Fourth and Vine streets, Benner has gotten approvals for a nine-story building of apartments and a ground-floor restaurant.

Benner has also been looking at 15 W. Fourth St., where he once said he wants to convert a former church into a \$33 million student apartment high-rise punctuated by ground-level restaurants, a coffee shop and perhaps a hip bar. The project was listed in the city's application in 2013 to win the CRIZ designation, but he has not submitted any plans for that.

None of those projects has come before the Bethlehem Revitalization and Improvement Zone Authority for funding.

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