

A New Vision for Downtown Bath

Downtown Bath is the only place in the Lehigh Valley sitting at the intersection of five state roads. With that unique map comes unique opportunities and challenges.

Those roads funnel more than 12,000 vehicles a day past the doorsteps of the Main Street businesses, but they also create parking, pedestrian safety and traffic volume issues.

A Lehigh Valley Planning Commission yearlong study, unveiled Saturday, looks to maximize those opportunities while reducing the issues by recommending a more cohesive parking and traffic plan and accentuating the district's historic character.

In short, it seeks to help transform the image of the borough as a frustrating point along a necessary route into that of a vibrant destination that attracts to drivers, pedestrians and bicyclists, said Whitney Burdge, an LVPC Urban Design Planner who authored the plan with Senior Traffic Technician Brian Hite.

The 80-page Bath Multimodal Safety and Parking Analysis study released Saturday before 50 people during a Bath Town Hall meeting follows a similar LVPC plan developed in downtown Catasauqua in 2016.

"Much like the Catasauqua plan, this program has a chance to have a dramatic impact on downtown Bath," said Becky Bradley, LVPC Executive Director. "This is the kind of community building we plan to do a lot more of in the coming years."

Borough Manager Brad Flynn said he's hoping to apply some of the recommendations as soon as possible.

"Every time I talk about this report I get emotional – I get goosebumps when I think about what could happen over the next five years," Flynn said. "This is an exciting time for our borough."

Bath is among the region's oldest boroughs - established by Scottish and Irish settlers in 1728 - still possessing much of its historic architecture. But its downtown sits at the intersection of Routes 248, 329, 512, 987 and 3020. In addition, it sits in the path of a burgeoning freight corridor that daily sends tractor-trailers along sometimes winding roads that were not built for vehicles so large.

It's made navigating the business district a challenge for drivers, shoppers and pedestrians. So Flynn, in 2016, asked for an LVPC analysis to help sort out its parking issues.

“We realized almost immediately that this was about more than just parking,” Burdge said. “It was about safety, increasing the flexibility and value of parking assets, and promoting attractive, alternative transportation options, all of which will only contribute to the borough’s plan of gradually increasing commercial density, boosting opportunities for community programming and creating more connectivity with the growing towns surrounding Bath.”

The analysis released Saturday determined that, contrary to the belief of many, there are plenty of parking spaces in the district, but no clear plan for utilizing them efficiently. It also determined that strategic safety measures are needed to deal with traffic volumes and space constraints, and that a lack of cohesion was hiding the downtown’s beautiful 18th Century look.

With a maximum of 59% of the study area’s 255 on-street parking spaces used, even at peak times, the plan recommends paid parking for prime spaces within the business district, keeping a steady turnover for merchants who need it, while allowing free parking for anyone willing to walk a block or so.

It also recommends traffic-calming measures such as speed tables, striped pedestrian crosswalks and a parking striping system designed to bring clarity to parking the district.

In the longer term, it gives options for alternative truck routes that would keep trucks out of congestion hot spots, and other measures such as shared lane bike markings and a complete sidewalk network, designed to make the district more welcoming to people without cars. The plan also gives options for accentuating the borough’s historic character with design treatments, such as parklets, building murals and community gardens.

“It’s a wonderful borough that happens to be at a very challenging location,” Bradley said. “All the potential is there. It really just needs a cohesive plan to bring it all together.”

The plan does not dictate how Bath’s downtown should be remade, but rather provides a menu of options to choose. Ultimately, it will be up to Borough Council to decide which, if any, options will be implemented.

Council is expected to begin discussing some of the options as early as June.

“Honestly,” Flynn said, “I’m anxious to get started.”