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Lehigh tackles town-gown woes

Student Senate sets sights on neighbors. Interaction must be better, president says.

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BETHLEHEM | For Lehigh's Student Senate getting along with the university's South Side neighbors ranks as highly as solving the campus' parking problems.

The Student Senate has created a community relations committee, one of five representing the group's top priorities for the year. For the Student Senate to have a community relations committee is a rare occurrence, President Divya Nayar said.

"We want to put our best foot forward," she said. "If nothing else, we would like to have a better relationship with the town."

Senate members plan to attend city council meetings and meet with South Side residents to ask their opinions of Lehigh. The opinions may not be positive, Nayar said.

"They see a lot of the negative aspects," she said, pointing to the 100 students cited by city police in the first three weeks of school. "We're not just people going out every weekend -- there's a lot more to us than that."

Lehigh could do more to open its campus to its neighbors, Nayar said. The annual Spring Fling brings people to campus, but more is needed, she said.

"It shouldn't be this is Bethlehem and this is Lehigh's campus and that's it," she said. "We want to promote Lehigh in general as a place where everyone is welcome."

Sharon Basso, Lehigh's associate vice provost for student affairs and dean of students, said the university has a well-established tradition of community engagement but increased efforts improve relations even more.

"It is always good for the students to seek out positive engagement with the local community as the students find those efforts rewarding and inspiring, and both the university and the community are the beneficiaries," she said.

Roger Hudak, chairman of the Mayor's South Side Task Force, said Lehigh's involvement with the community has increased in recent years. Students regularly take part in the task force's annual neighborhood cleanup and some participated in the restoration of St. Michael's Cemetery, he said.

Others are members of South Side block watch groups. Increased student involvement on the South Side is always welcome, Hudak said.

"Lehigh's becoming a better neighbor than they used to be -- they're not as isolated as they were," he said.

Councilwoman Jean Belinski, however, said Lehigh could be doing a lot more for the community. The administration has done little to rein in problem students, but maybe their peers could make a difference, she said.

"I think this is a very good idea and it's long past due," Belinski said of students attending city council meetings. "I think this is a good step in the right direction."

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