

The Banana Factory Expansion: “It’s not a Sophie’s Choice” (4)

The Bethlehem Gadfly Banana Factory Expansion, Serious Issues September 18, 2018

(4th in a series of posts on Banana Factory Expansion)

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Dear Gadfly:

The Bethlehem Historic Conservation Commission (HCC) is faced with a difficult choice, and it’s a doozy. Monday night (9/17) they were presented with an amazing expansion plan by ArtsQuest, which has terrific new ideas for a newer, larger facility on the site of the Banana Factory. I’m particularly excited about the arts-based preschool that could be life-changing for many Southside families, as well as others around town (really, no overstatement for an underserved community!). But the project comes with a significant cost, and I’m not just talking about the amount of money required to develop it. Rather, it includes significant changes to the streetscape and demolition of several historical structures — all of this within the Historic Conservation District (HCD) in south Bethlehem.

So my excitement is tempered by serious concern. I am keenly aware that the Historic Conservation District (which covers most of the Third Street and Fourth Street commercial corridors, and some additional historic structures) is living on the edge these days. They have faced some pretty significant and continuous challenges in the past few years, as development ramps up with tax incentives provided by the state. A few years back, as the tax incentive district rolled into town, a contentious

development project, the HCC bowed to pressure, in the name of “economic revitalization,” to excuse a local developer from HCD guidelines. They have publicly reflected on that since, as they strengthened their resolve to stay out of the revitalization arena and stick to their charge of considering the historic impact of demolition, alteration, and other potential destruction of the conservation district landscape and buildings.

As a result, a few recent building projects have gone through significant alterations in response to the HCC digging in their heels about maintaining scale and height rules in particular, and they have pushed developers hard to blend their structures in to the streetscapes of South Bethlehem. This effort has been fairly successful; residents and business owners look forward to seeing the new four-story building — designed with appropriate building materials and architectural elements — go up soon on W. Morton Street across from Lehigh’s Farrington Square. HCC members are already using the Morton Street decision as a precedent for sticking to their guidelines when it comes to appropriate building height for structures proposed within the conservation district. And plans are well underway (in negotiation with the HCC) for a new, historically appropriate restoration of, and addition to, the Goodman Building on E. Third St.

But what to do about this ArtsQuest proposal, for a great new facility? The difficult questions emerge: what kind of precedent could this set for the Historic Conservation District if it is passed by the HCC? Would this be something other developers could cite, to push for their own demolition of historical structures or proposed changes to the streetscape of South Bethlehem commercial corridors? As a city we want to encourage the arts, and this is something that “brands” the Southside. Would an HCC denial chase such development out of the Southside? But if the HCC gives a bye to this project, what is the next “essential revitalization project” that may come along, seeking a reprieve from the HCC guidelines? And what would that mean for the future of Bethlehem’s historical Southside vibe?

I am grateful for the thoughtfulness and endless patience of the Historic Conservation Commission members. I thank them for taking on this difficult work. What’s great about the committed, extremely

knowledgeable volunteers on the HCC is that they are tirelessly willing to negotiate, advise, and otherwise work with developers and their architects till they come up with something that suits the HCD charge and complements our city's "brand," history! I have confidence in their ability to work this through. It's not a "Sophie's Choice"; it's Bethlehem's future.

Kim