

Reflections on Southside Bethlehem, Part 5: My New Neighborhood

The Bethlehem Gadfly Affordable Housing, Neighborhoods, Serious Issues, Southside June 15, 2019

(Conclusion of a 5-part series of posts on the Southside by Anna Smith)

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Gadfly:

The Southside is far from a monolith, and I moved a mile across town this past winter. I'm not sure what my neighborhood's challenges and opportunities are quite yet, but I'm starting to get a feel for my new community. I look forward to continuing conversations about my neighbors' hopes and fears for their community over the backyard fence and on nightly dog walks on the eastern side of south Bethlehem.

I bet that housing affordability will be a big one—my mortgage payment is a lot cheaper than what I paid in rent for a much smaller and more run-down place on the Southside. Rental prices are spiraling upward, and there isn't nearly enough affordable, quality housing to go around. It seems to me that neighborhood change is accelerating these challenges, and the stories I hear from residents on a daily basis illustrate the human impact of our affordable housing crisis. What do we do about it? As always, my inclination is start by listening.

There are no simple or straightforward answers when it comes to dealing with neighborhood change. But as it continues, here are a few principles that I'll be keeping in mind:

1. The Southside is a unique, diverse community with individuals who have a range of perspectives on any issue—any attempt to suggest otherwise is disrespectful to the experience and agency of those who call our community home. All have the right to be heard.
2. The best ideas usually come from those who have personal experience with the topic at hand. If they are not at the table, then we should stop discussion until they are and do what it takes to make participation easy—even if it means taking a step back or down.
3. Southside Bethlehem has always changed and will continue to change. However, the inevitability of change does not mean we have to accept all changes as inevitable.
4. Deficit-based thinking leads to missed opportunities, or worse, can lead to the accidental destruction of assets. If we can identify what is great about our neighborhoods, we can preserve it and use it as inspiration for future development. Always start with assets.

It may be hard to believe, but former Southsider and folk singer John Gorka wrote [this song](#) about south Bethlehem in 1991. Concerns about neighborhood change are hardly new to the Southside and are indicative of a deep sense of commitment to a community. The least we can do, and the best place for any of us to start, is to listen to them.