

# **Antalics in 2012: “a very real and very dangerous condition exists on the South Side”**

The Bethlehem Gadfly Neighborhoods, Southside July 27, 2019

*(The latest in a series of posts on the Southside and Neighborhoods)*

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## **Bethlehem should revisit its zoning ordinance**

### **Morning Call, September 4, 2012**

For a city to maintain an environment of stability, safety and a sense of well-being in the community, its zoning ordinance must require a high ratio of family-owned residences compared to rental properties owned by nonresident landlords. This helps reduce transiency, and the high percentage of family homes also adds to a collective civic pride — an essential community element.

The Bethlehem South Side master plan in 2001 recommended that the area would benefit from more family-owned properties and fewer rentals. That hasn't happened. The city's zoning ordinance, adopted May 7, allows up to five unrelated people living together in one unit. This zoning designation encourages property owners to rent to Lehigh University students and others. Families, however, bring stability to a neighborhood.

When a real estate speculator can purchase a vacated South Side single-family row home for approximately \$65,000, convert it into a rental student property and charge a monthly total rent to five students for \$3,000, that is good business. For one New York City real estate

company that owns 72 student rental buildings on the South Side, that becomes big business.

An inventory of South Side rental properties shows more than 75 “student-only” signs, which gives an ominous message to a single family wishing to live there. But a very real and very dangerous condition exists on the South Side. Reasonably affluent students who are on the streets late at night have become victims of juvenile predators, some of whom, according to city police, are gang members. Some of these juveniles live in nonresident, landlord-owned rentals, according to property records. Remember, according to the zoning ordinance, the city is required to view them as a legal family.

How do other communities with student populations address the issue? All set a limit of unrelated people living in a unit that is less than the five set by Bethlehem.

Radnor Township, a suburban Philadelphia community with a population of approximately 30,000, is the home of Villanova University, which has a student population of approximately 10,500. Its zoning ordinance reflects a family definition restricting it to only the traditional family. It also has a definition for student housing, and it defines students as transients and limits a student rental property to two students.

The City of Easton, the home of Lafayette College, defines a family as the traditional family but also allows three unrelated individuals to share a rental property. The City of Allentown, the home of Muhlenberg and Cedar Crest colleges, defines family in a similar manner but allows four unrelated people to live in a rental property. Allentown has a student housing definition along with a clause that includes a Student Residence Overlay District subject to stricter regulation.

Why does the Bethlehem administration not change its recent zoning revisions to be in line with other communities? Could not the South Side have a limited student overlay district immediately adjacent to the campus allowing five students, while rental properties outside that district are restricted to two unrelated persons? This would make rentals available to traditional families and possibly put rentals financially out of reach of gang members?

It is incumbent for Bethlehem City Council members, who had the final responsibility of approving or rejecting this zoning ordinance, to listen carefully to the public whose welfare they are elected to protect; comments of the public should guide council members in their actions.

The great public outcry at a number of council meetings concerning this zoning ordinance revision, an outcry supported by intelligent and researched reports, was a clear message — a message that council ignored. We citizens know what is best for us. Therefore it is imperative that council listen to us and not submit to political pressures.

Stephen

*An oldie but goodie from Gadfly #1. Let's examine our consciences — have "we" done enough to back Gadfly #1 and put the pressure on the City and Council?*