

Smith's Song of the South(side)

The Bethlehem Gadfly Southside December 18, 2020

 *The latest in a series of posts on the Southside* 

At the December 15 City Council meeting Anna Smith called in to support the “pending ordinance” resolution regarding the new ordinance regulating student housing, especially around Lehigh University.

This is a long-awaited ordinance designed, among other things, to protect Southside residential neighborhoods around Lehigh.

Anna devoted most of her supporting statement on the ordinance to her “personal perspective” as a Southside native and resident.

And in doing so Anna provided what Gadfly finds to be a wonderful definition of “neighborhood” and of “Southside” neighborhood.

You may have seen and heard her words yesterday in a business context, but now Gadfly encourages you to luxuriate solely in this vision of a residential quality of life separate from restaurants and parking garages and casinos and waterparks — a Southside many of us need to know exists and that must be preserved.

Listen to Anna's excitement (4 mins.):

I'd like to contextualize this policy change from my personal perspective.

I want to talk to you as someone who loves everything about South Bethlehem and who has spent the majority of my life living and working on its streets. I moved back here after 8 years away and decided to invest in the neighborhood that made me who I am, much in the way that my parents decided to invest in the Southside 33 years ago. Not because of ArtsQuest, or the Southside Arts District, or Lehigh, although those are all important aspects of our neighborhood's character that make the Southside a great place to live. I moved back here because I want to raise my Latina daughter in a neighborhood where she won't be the only kid speaking Spanish, and where she'll hear Spanish on the street just as often as she will hear English. I invested in my neighborhood because I want my daughter to grow up like I did, with friends and neighbors of all racial backgrounds and socioeconomic levels. I came back because I believe in our public schools and want my daughter to be able to walk to Donegan Elementary in a few years. I moved back because I wanted to live within a five-minute walk of a playground, a pool, and the Greenway, restaurants, mini-markets, and the woods. I moved back because South Bethlehem represents the best of what it means to live in a true community. Sure, we have some challenges, like any community, but we have so much to be proud of.



And it is so important for our elected officials to understand that—not just at a surface level, or based on their own experiences on the Southside as outsiders, or from conversations with representatives of institutions... We need our elected officials and their staff to make an effort to listen and spend time with residents of all backgrounds that make up the vibrant, dynamic community at work in our Southside neighborhoods. To walk around, like I do, and chat with my next-door neighbor, a single Grandma who gives my daughter a little present for every holiday, and the young Puerto Rican couple with twins next door who always offer us food from the barbecue. The young married couple of women with the pit bulls who hang out on the porch every evening with their next-door neighbors, a black family with kids who race their scooters in front of my house and always ask to pet my dog. The older white man with a disabled son who always keeps the front of his house impeccably maintained and watches over the street. The Mexican family who just moved in this year but have already shown us all up with their holiday decorations. This is what my ideal neighborhood looks like, and where I chose to invest. We need you to understand why this is worth protecting and thinking about, not just today but each time you are asked to consider a policy change that will impact us.

The neighborhoods of the Southside have always had a certain reputation, and most of those who live here have rarely had a say in decisions that are made about it. We don't have many elected representatives or appointed ones who live on our streets, and we often assume that no one from the other side of town cares about our neighborhoods. But things are changing, and folks from outside the Southside are now paying attention. New folks want to move here, to live or open businesses. Developers want to build, and others see opportunities to make a profit. And I want to be clear: I appreciate the energy and the fact that folks are getting excited about the neighborhoods that I love so much. But we can't forget what is attracting these folks in the first place—the essential character of our community that has been here for a lot longer than I have. And we owe that to the

people who defined these neighborhoods, who invested their time and livelihoods into these streets and homes, who send their kids to local schools, who watch over neighborhood parks and walk the Greenway to work every day. The families who opened businesses decades ago in a different economic climate, and who have won the love and support of generations of residents. Please remember them. As our Southside evolves into the future, we need to plan for the long-term and be proactive, lest we risk losing the very heart of our community and what makes it truly unique, and irreplaceable.

****That's Anna and family at Saucon Park.*

*Anna and her mother are dual “Sirens of the Southside.” Remember that her mother Kim Carrell-Smith has exhorted us to keep South Bethlehem **funky!***

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