

Gadfly council forum #2: development

[The Bethlehem Gadfly](#) [Candidates for election](#), [Election](#), [Forum](#), [Gadfly Forum](#) March 23, 2021

🦋 Latest in a series of posts on the Gadfly Forum 🦋

[The Council candidates comparison chart](#)

“I have always tried to balance everyone’s needs and concerns.”
Bryan Callahan

“It is possible to experience and live in our history while also exploring and innovating architecturally.”
Hillary Kwiatek

“There is middle ground between economic development and our commitment to history.”
Rachel Leon

“Thoughtful development exists, change can have conservation at its heart.”
Kiera Wilhelm

A tip o’ the hat to everybody who’s running.



Gadfly’s depending on you to match the time the candidates gave to responding to his prompts from hell by thoughtfully reading everybody’s statement. He’ll vary the order of presentation each time — this time we are in alphabetical order.

The prompt:

Good people: Bryan, Grace, Hillary, Rachel. Kiera

Let’s have some fun. Go down Memory Lane with me.

You talked about budget in Forum #1, arguably Council’s most important responsibility.

Next for me in terms of importance is the role Council plays in “development,” the role I might call “The Court of Last Resort,” the City’s “Supreme Court.”

There has been significant tension in the City over development decisions. I probably don’t have to tell you that. Think Armory, Martin Tower, the Zest building at 306 S.New, etc. And there are a couple major proposals floating on both the North and South sides now that I am sure you know about and might encounter if you are on Council.

Bryan has been around a long time. He’s seen it all. Grace has been around long enough to see some of the all. But this might be totally new to the rest of you.

Let’s look at one case that I think you can get your arms around fairly quickly by looking at a few newspaper articles. A developer has had approval to build a 9-story building at 4th and Vine (the Déjà Vu, Goosey Gander corner) since 2015. We haven’t heard anything about it for a while, but it is the contentious approval process I want you to think about.

Background:

- The City has 3 historic districts
- The Southside historic district is governed by design guidelines administered by the South Bethlehem Historic Conservation Commission (HCC)
- The HCC guidelines are [here](#): for our purpose in this prompt, see pages 8-9
- The HCC is a recommending, an advisory body, and reports to City Council, which has the final say on proposals
- The **HCC** is made up of volunteers appointed/approved by the City

Focus on the issue of the 9-story height of the approved building at 4th and Vine. You will see that in the guidelines 2-3 stories are considered the norm to be used as the point of reference for new buildings on the Southside. I have heard HCC members at meetings push that up to 4-5 stories as the norm. But either way 9-stories is quite a departure.

Think of that, the height of the building, as the issue for our discussion.

I would say that you will find 2 issues in this case that I would like you to think about, 2 issues that you will likely see again on Council.

- how closely need the historic guidelines be followed by Council?
- does economic development outweigh our commitment to history?

Like with the choice in the budget prompt, these are tough calls that I feel very confident you will be called on to make (or make again, Bryan). Think of this as a practice field.

Talk it out in your Forum #2 response.

See Morning Call articles attached

March 19, 2014: HCC approves developer proposal for 7-story building

April 2, 2014: City Council approves HCC recommendation for 7-story building

Sept 30, 2014: developer pitches 9-story building to HCC

Oct 22, 2014: after floating a 12-story building, the developer gets HCC approval for a 9-story building

Oct 31, 2014: as this proposal heads to City Council at Nov 5 meeting, opposition to a 9[story building mounts, including from the South Bethlehem Historical Society

Nov 6, 2014: City Council supports 9-story building – marathon, heavily attended meeting

April 26, 2015: a local gadfly calls Council decision absurd

April 29, 2015: SBHS appeals Council ruling to Northampton County Court

May 28, 2015: Court denies the appeal

For real immersion in the issue, go to the [minutes of the Nov 5, 2014 City Council meeting](#), where 3 dozen residents spoke (!), almost all against the approval that Council eventually gave for the 9-story building by a 5-2 vote (almost all the Council members also spoke to support their votes – don't miss their rationales).

(Public comment on this topic is not all together, scroll through the public comment section at the beginning of the minutes for headings “*Certificate of Appropriateness – 24-30 W. Fourth Street – Benner Project.*”)

That's what makes the case so interesting. Council voted against public opinion rather massively arrayed right in front of them.

Ha! Profiles in courage, or . . .

Hard choices, indeed.

Bound to be in your future!

Do you see the (rather perennial) issues in development?

Thanks for your service, and your willingness to serve.

Bryan Callahan

Ed,

I think it was during last year's budget hearings when Mr. Reynolds asked a very direct but important question to the Mayor and the administration. How much



extra money, each year, does the City need to bring in to pay for health care increases, pension liabilities, and negotiated contract increases?

The answer was approximately \$2 million each year!! Where will that money come from? As I stated in last week's prompt, it has to come from one of two sources . . . tax increases or economic development.

Depending on who you are, those are not two great choices. Last year the Mayor proposed and got the votes from the other Council members to increase your taxes 5%. That increase of 5%, which I did not support or vote for, brought in roughly \$1.5 million. If that continues for just 5 years, with no economic development, taxes would increase 25% above what they currently are, and that still leaves us with a shortage of \$500,000 per year.

Now imagine sitting on Council and having to make that decision. Raising taxes on residents is not a good option for people on fixed incomes, the elderly, the poor, businesses, or, in fact, many at all. Raising taxes also directly causes monthly rents to increase on many renters in our City. This in turn makes Bethlehem less affordable for everyone, but even more so on lower and medium income residents to live here. Shouldn't Council members be concerned about affordable housing? What other options are there? Oh, oh . . . Economic Development projects! Should Council approve and support economic development projects in the commercially zoned areas of the City, so it brings in more jobs for City residents, more customers for our local businesses, more taxes coming in without raising taxes on our residents? Very hard decisions. Especially when some of the local residents show up to oppose it. What would you do? Do you keep taxing the current residents more and more and make Bethlehem less affordable to live in, do you approve more economic development projects in commercial zones, or do you do a balancing act and weigh the pros and cons of each?

The other issue is that our neighboring cities are always competing with us every year to take economic development dollars from Bethlehem and the customers that come along with it. Should we let that happen and just keep raising taxes? Big decisions. What would you do? (See below from *The Express Times*)

I have always tried to balance everyone's needs and concerns.

EASTON, Pa [March 17]. – The city of Easton could be about a week away from approving the sale of the former Days Inn lot to Peron

Development. Peron’s design, called the “Confluence,” would be a massive development for downtown Easton. “Iconic. It’s going to be an iconic project for the city, it really is,” said Mayor Sal Panto. Panto said the city is waiting for Peron Development to sign the agreement of sale. Then city council can vote to approve.

The city bought the property, the site of the former Days Inn, for nearly \$6 million. Panto said it was appraised at and will sell for \$3.9 million.

He said the hotel was a rundown but successful business that attracted the wrong crowds and crime to downtown Easton.

“Anybody who knows real estate knows we bought a thriving business with a building on it. So . . . we had to buy the thriving business and what we’re selling is vacant land,” Panto said. “The city will recover its money, its \$2 million, within 4 years with no tax increase, just real estate taxes.” The redevelopment will include condos, apartments, a two-screen movie theatre run by ArtsQuest, a grocery store and space for retail stores. The development will be built 10-feet above ground, a flood plain, with 300 parking spaces below. There had been discussion of including a hotel, but Mayor Panto said that changed during the pandemic. Panto said the development will bring over \$100,000 in taxes to the school district during its first year up and running and more than \$1 million after 10 years. “I see this as the city making a good investment in their downtown . . . which is going to help our residents and not have to raise their taxes,” said Panto.

Hillary Kwiatek

The votes taken on November 5, 2014, by Council on this project were twofold – 1) a certificate of appropriateness for the demolition of existing vacant structures and 2) a certificate of appropriateness to construct a 9-story building on the site *conditional on*



the approval of details and materials at 24-30 West Fourth Street.

Having studied historic preservation as part of my graduate degree in folk studies at Western Kentucky University, I am familiar with the *Secretary of Interior's Standards* and the principles involved. The standards call for taking “great care” to maintain a cohesive ambience, to pay particular attention to proportional siting, scale, materials, roof, etc.

While I personally do have concerns when a building is proposed that is significantly taller than those on the block on which it will be situated, thinking about this issue also reminded me of a visit to London I was lucky enough to take several years ago. The city has a history that dates back 2,000 years, and tourists flock to see Buckingham Palace and the Tower of London. Yet, there you will also see tall steel and glass buildings situated near 300 year-old pubs once frequented by the likes of Samuel Johnson and Charles Dickens. It reminded me that it is possible to experience and live in our history while also exploring and innovating architecturally.

Having said that, I also recognize that providing guidance on historical appropriateness of a building project in the South Bethlehem Historic District is the domain of the Historic Conservation Commission (HCC). Their role is to advise the city on matters such as this. Council tends to affirm the HCC's decisions (though not always, and not always unanimously) because the HCC is composed of knowledgeable professionals who are well-versed in the secretary's standards as well as the history of Southside Bethlehem.

The HCC approved the certificate of appropriateness for the project *conditionally*, which is a very important point. Those conditions mean that the building's design and plans will have to continue to undergo review by the HCC as the project moves along. In this situation, a majority of Council members felt that with the conditions as stated, they should approve the COA.

Development projects such as the Fourth and Vine project are really a prolonged negotiation. A developer will understandably start by shooting for the moon — eleven stories! It is the job of various bodies of city government, including Council, the HCC, or HARB, the Zoning Hearing Board, and others, to bring the developer back to Earth and to use the

process to gain as much benefit for the community as possible. So the November 2014 COA vote was the beginning and not even close to the end of this project's approval process.

Designating a historic district in a city brings benefits to those who reside within it, including increased property values and an assurance of relative stability of the built environment. But it also creates a tension between private property and community interest. The development approval process, with all its bureaucracy, is where these tensions are addressed and resolved.

Private real estate development projects, even those developed with tax incentives, have the potential to put properties back on the tax rolls and add jobs. They can also bring more residents and visitors to our community and its small businesses. However, projects can jeopardize the balance of a community if they result in upward pressure on the rental market or diminish the sense of place that has been a hallmark of our historic districts in Bethlehem.

As a Council member, I would welcome the opportunity to be a part of the development process to find solutions that can help us preserve what is great about Bethlehem while also growing our tax base. As with everything a Council member does, it is likely the outcome will not please everyone. That's part of the job and why there are elections.

One last note. I will not be accepting donations from developers for my campaign. When I vote on projects, I want the people of Bethlehem to have complete confidence that I am making those decisions based on my principles and what I believe is in the best interest of the city.

Rachel Leon

After reading multiple articles about development in South Bethlehem (where I live) and having conversations with South Side residents about the topic of development (specifically high-rise structures), I can confidently say this is a topic that evokes a lot



of emotion. The amount of feedback I received would take me ten pages to convey, so I would like to stick to the specific talking points we were presented: 1) How closely should the historic guidelines be followed by city council?, 2) Does economic development outweigh our commitment to history?

Regarding city council's adherence to the historic conservation district guidelines, I believe the court ruling provided a legal argument about the advisory status of the South Bethlehem Historic Conservation Commission (SBHCC). According to the court ruling discussed in the articles provided by the Gadfly, legally, city council does not need to adhere to the SBHCC recommendations. I believe in some instances this has its benefits. From my understanding, the SBHCC was created by city council, and its members are confirmed by a vote of city council. Part of its obligations are to adhere to historic guidelines, which specifically address the replacement of older structures with new structures built within the South Bethlehem Historic Conservation District. However, because council can choose to accept or reject SBHCC recommendations, it's important to explain how I would approach development in historic areas of our city.

If elected to council, my process would be to listen so the feedback from the community as well as to listen to the case presented by the SBHCC. I believe that residents of this city will want to do what is best for their families and their community. If the residents are coming out against a certain development project, then I believe they will have weighed the benefits of the additional tax revenue to the city against what they would be asked to sacrifice. If they are seeing these additional tax revenues spent in their community to offset their sacrifice, I believe they would be more accepting of slight deviations from the historical guidelines. But these deviations should be met with overwhelming support from the community if it is going to override historical preservation.

The issue of economic development and historical preservation is just as complex as whether to accept recommendations of advisory bodies such as the SBHCC. Bethlehem is a beautiful city with pockets of history scattered everywhere. In many cases developers have been able to marry their modern concepts to the historical preservation that makes Bethlehem what it is. Just recently, a developer in our city has

demonstrated what it means to go above and beyond what local laws require to make sure that the needs of the City and its natural environment were placed before the project's economic success. When it comes to growing our tax base, these are the developers that we should be actively seeking out and attracting. Developers that truly put the core of Bethlehem at what they do.

Bethlehem makes the news on a regular basis as one of the most festive places to visit. Part of the success of so many of our small businesses is due to the charm that brings tourists to our historic city. The argument could be made that we should allow more over-development in the urban cores of our city because it would have a positive economic impact. But my concern is that we could lose all the old world charm to high-rise, modern buildings. This too would have an economic impact, but it would be a negative impact because it would undermine the historic value of our city. To quote a south side resident, "Historic preservation is our brand." If we diminish the quality of our historic districts by allowing out-of-scale development, we diminish our attraction to tourists who come here for a uniquely historic experience. And I believe the south side historic district deserves the same commitment to preservation that prevails on the north side of the City. Another important point when it comes to development and our commitment to history is that the guidelines for the south side historic district are readily available. Developers who buy property within the borders of the district know that approval of their project are subject to compliance with the historic guidelines. They should not assume that these guidelines will be ignored for the sake of their profits.

I firmly believe that there is middle ground between economic development and our commitment to history. I love to see interest in the City, especially when it shows areas like South Bethlehem to be what I know it is—a beautiful diverse, culturally rich, and exciting area of the city. If the interest in this area comes at the expense of the families that already live here and have for multiple generations, then I believe that is when the City should step in and stand up for the community that is already here. There is so much more to our communities and how they are developed than just the HCC and its guidelines. City Council needs to ask questions about how development will impact traffic, congestion, air quality, and other factors that may undermine residents' quality of life.

In front of my house right now a parking lot is being built. In my community this field has been the green space that children have played in for decades. In the winter it is where they sled, in the summer it is where they played football. Many of the children learned how to climb trees on the giant locust, a native tree crucial to our ecological diversity, that once stood in the field. As development projects eliminate these spaces, we also need to be attentive to recreating accessible greenspace, in places that are safe and equally accessible to our neighborhoods.

Responsible development is a crucial part of keeping Bethlehem's economy strong, especially in these difficult times. While we continue to grow and develop as a city, we cannot lose focus of the fact that our primary concern needs to be the health, welfare, and happiness of our residents, not our developers. And I say this knowing that developers that love the city as much as I do feel the same.

Kiera Wilhelm

To say that Bethlehem has a rich history is an understatement.

Bethlehem contains multiple National Historic Landmarks and National Register Historic Districts. One of those districts, Historic Moravian Bethlehem, has been designated a World Heritage List candidate. Our industrial history is not only honored by landmarks in our own City, it is felt nationwide: it quite literally helped build our nation. It stands to reason that preserving that history—those *histories*, really—and our historic districts, is of great meaning to many.

Prompt #2 asks us to consider economic development vs. our commitment to history. In a nutshell, I believe these two things don't need to be (nor should they be) framed as mutually exclusive. They can coexist.

Gadfly, you shared in a recent post the very thoughtful list of ten [Community-Centered Principles for Responsible Southside Development](#) put forth by Southside resident and former CACLV Director Anna Smith. These principles are, in my estimation, an ideal balance. In the



interest of *honoring the present needs of our community*, the principles suggest supporting projects that incorporate locally-owned businesses; that create diverse, accessible, and affordable offerings; that include green and public spaces; and that encourage sustainable development practices. They suggest avoiding projects that cause displacement of long-time residents, low-income residents, and local businesses. In the interest of *preserving our history*, the principles encourage projects that blend with surrounding historic architecture in both design and size and prioritize development on vacant properties over demolishing historic properties. They reflect attention to *both things*: our responsibility to preserve history and our responsibility to serve the needs of our community today and into the future.

In certain cases, exceptions within an historic district have been made, and likely will be made again. But a valuable new project that requires a departure from any one of the agreed-upon guidelines can be asked to compensate by generously benefiting another. (Or perhaps it requires a departure from one of the guidelines *because* it generously benefits another.) If, for example, a structure is taller than standard, perhaps it incorporates more truly affordable and accessible housing. If its design departs from historic design guidelines, perhaps it actively supports locally-owned business with particular attention to the needs of residents. Or maybe it is a model of sustainable building practices, or it incorporates vibrant public and/or green spaces that are fully accessible to the wider community.

(It's also worth mentioning here that thoughtful development exists, that change can have conservation at its heart. We've been fortunate to have seen it very recently in the redevelopment of the Masonic Temple and Wilbur Mansion. Regular readers of this blog know well the story of local teacher and nature advocate Jennie Gilrain's fateful email to developer John Noble and his swift [pun acknowledged] decision to painstakingly preserve the building's chimney in order to preserve the habitat of the birds within it. This is a shining example, and hopefully will inspire a local trend, in ethical development.)

I love living in a City full of history I can see; there is inspiration and significance in preserving what came before us and in being literally surrounded by it. The history of Bethlehem is part of what drew me here

as a college student over 30 years ago. I value deeply that our City honors, with great pride, the landmarks that serve as a tribute to our origins, our resiliency, our path. It's not just *charm*; it's who we are.

I also love living in a City that innovates with creative vision for a vibrant and sustainable future for all of its citizens. A City that embraces its diversity, supports local business, and cares for its environment and those in need. That is invigorated by public art, green spaces, and walkable streets. That builds on its successes, learns from its mistakes, and keeps at its heart the well-being of every resident. All of these things are Bethlehem. Here, we don't have just one or the other. We get to have both.

Residents are welcome to fashion reflections on candidate comments, sending them to ejg1@lehigh.edu. On Gadfly we seek the good conversation that builds community, so please be courteous at all times. Gadfly retains the right to abridge and to edit your reflections and to decline posts that are repetitive or that contain personal attacks. Gadfly will publish resident reflections on the week's Forum at noon on Friday.