

Riddle me Garrison St., Gadfly

The Bethlehem Gadfly 11 and 15 West Garrison St., Neighborhoods, Northside, Serious Issues
October 1, 2019

(8th in a series of posts about 11 and 15 W. Garrison St.)

Gadfly loves to role play. It's the English major in him.

Play along.

Pretend you are a Councilperson at the Head Table tonight.

What's going through your mind when the Garrison St. rezoning comes up?

You are going to give somebody pain.

A neighborhood rests in your hands.

Think it through.

Quality of the physical environment:

The 700 block of N. New St. and the top of W. Garrison: pretty nice area, well-maintained homes, clean, no blight, certainly not an eye-sore, not close to needing rehab, the one missing tooth is the result of a sinkhole. The home on the corner of New and Garrison is really kind of interesting architecturally. Nothing crying out for change here. So, is the proposed development so strong as to overpower a stable status quo?

Quality of the resident environment:

A cluster of Garrison residents testified — both highly emotionally and more straightforward — to the powerful sense of community in the Garrison neighborhood and to the beauty and unique elements of their homes. They raised concerns about the destruction of that community feeling, about the impact on their children, and about scale, security, safety, the impact of construction in a sinkhole area, and so forth. But how many neighbors must come forward to sway me? What about the other hundred people in that block? And what if those testifiers don't come to the first and second reading? What am I to make of that? Does that mean I can discount them? How do I truly know if I am feeling the pulse of the neighborhood, of the community?

The developer:

Hmm, seemed like a good guy. I sense the neighbors feel that way about him. His name and other work (if he has any) are not familiar to me — I know of no baggage as comes with some developers. But I can't approve his proposal because he's a good guy. He's the one proposing the change. He's the one disrupting or destroying a neighborhood seeming stable architecturally and community-wise. He's got "to make a compelling and convincing case." What is his case? He said he's following the Comprehensive Plan about building apartments in the downtown area. He said he may look into housing for veterans. But his plans were very vague. He said he's just at the beginning of a long journey. He was definite about a limit on the height of the building. But the rendering he exhibited may not represent the final project. And I'm sensitive to the strong point made by an audience member that it would be a mistake to approve without a clear, definite idea what the end game is. There should be no blank check. I'm not sure the developer's "made a case."

The City:

What has the City to gain from approving the rezoning? Why should the City see rezoning to commercial as desirable? One answer might be more tax revenue. The City could always use it — pensions and public services like police and fire that can't really be cut dominate the budget. We'd like to have money for a new this and that. Our list of deferred budget items is long. But I'd like a figure, even ballpark. I remember the example CM Callahan keeps making of the way the Zest building at 3rd and New — built on a minimally taxable vacant lot — has enriched the tax coffers. But this situation is different. These are tax revenue properties on Garrison and New. What will be the tax consequence, even in ballpark terms. I'd like to know what the price for disrupting or destroying a stable community is. Is it worth it? What does "the property will generate more tax revenue" specifically mean? Another answer to what the City might get out of this project is more apartments close to downtown, more people spending money downtown. Now that is an oft-expressed goal. The project could be good for business. But we have Skyline, Boyd, 548 N. New, Martin Tower — getting close to a thousand new apartments coming online. Do we need more if it means disrupting or destroying a neighborhood?

This is fun, isn't it?

The politics:

I know a common sentiment — true or not — is that the City and Council favor developers, are in the pocket of the developers. I don't want to be seen that way. I'm an independent thinker. But the developer has rights and the City has goals and needs.

Your decision:

Ha! so where are you on the issue of rezoning 11 and 15 W. Garrison St.?

Let's see what happens tonight. With luck, Council members will give us an inside look into their thought processes and we can compare.

Remember that the Council meeting can be followed live as well as seen later in the archived video.

A neighborhood at stake maybe.

And Gadfly will report back, perhaps with some audio and video as well.

Festival UnBound

Ten days of original theatre, dance, music, art and conversation designed to celebrate and imagine our future together!

October 4-13