

Martin Tower developer: “I can’t believe this is as much of an issue as it is”

The Bethlehem Gadfly Martin Tower May 6, 2021

 Latest in a series of posts on Martin Tower 

ref: **Martin Tower proposal significantly interrogated at Council**

ref: **Trying to nail down the Martin Tower developer**

ref: **Martin Tower developer responds to Council request**

ref: **Martin Tower developer reminds Council that “tax revenues are an equally important consideration**

The discussion at Tuesday’s City Council meeting on the Martin Tower text amendment was a doozy! Does anyone still use that word????

Each of our Council members except Councilman Reynolds spoke and spoke in character, most definitely in character.

The developer was gobsmacked at so much fuss over, to him, so little.

As soon as he can, Gadfly will break the meeting down for you.

But, bottom line, Council agreed to postpone discussion for a month.

The beat goes on.

selections from *Christina Tatu, “Bethlehem City Council, concerned about parking at Martin Tower redevelopment, to revisit vote on changing zoning.” May 5, 2021.*

With concerns about parking dominating the conversation Tuesday night, Bethlehem City Council tabled the first vote on zoning amendments sought by the developer of the former Martin Tower property.

The zoning amendments would allow for the expansion of a signalized intersection on Eighth Avenue, allow for more parking in front of

medical offices proposed for the site, and decrease rear-yard setbacks from 30 feet to 20 feet. Without the parking amendment, developer Lewis Ronca said, the project may not be able to move forward.

Ronca said Tuesday night there are multiple parcels on the Martin Tower site that could each have different users. Having to go before zoners for each parcel would present a hardship. He also said the medical office users have a clause allowing them to terminate their contract if the buildings are not laid out specifically as they want them.

“This is ludicrous and an undue burden,” Ronca told City Council. “This is not an easy project.”

Council, which unanimously voted on the delay, plans to revisit the request at its June 1 meeting.

City Council’s concerns were mirrored by the Lehigh Valley Planning Commission, which provided an April 23 letter to city officials saying the developer’s proposal for the 53-acre property is generally inconsistent with the commission’s regional plan.

The Martin Tower redevelopment proposes two three-story medical offices and a 31,000-square-foot grocery store along Eighth Avenue. There would also be a 130-room hotel, two restaurants, a gas station and convenience store, and 300 apartment units.

The project would result in suburban-scale development patterns that are not characteristic with Bethlehem or conducive to multimodal accessibility, the letter from the Lehigh Valley Planning Commission says.

Although the amendments are requested for a specific site, if they were approved they would affect any property in the city zoned office mixed-use, including those that may have the designation in the future. For this reason, the Lehigh Valley Planning Commission recommended the developer seek a variance from the Bethlehem Zoning Hearing Board.

To limit parking lots along major roads, Bethlehem’s zoning restricts parking spaces between a commercial building and the street to one driving aisle and one row of spaces.

Ronca argued in a Feb. 15 letter to the city that the rules create poor vehicle flow around the medical offices and would require most of the parking be behind the buildings, creating access issues for patrons, most of whom would be elderly and would be required to walk a great distance to get into the facilities.

Ronca said he didn't think it would be an issue.

"We have buildings up and down the corridor with parking in front of them. I can't believe this is as much of an issue as it is," Ronca said. "We are literally talking about two buildings here. I can't for the life of me believe we are having the magnitude of conversation we are about two buildings."

Council member Bryan Callahan focused on the potential tax revenue and said he's worried the end user of the property would walk away from the project if City Council members drag their feet.

At least three potential users have questioned if the project is moving forward, Ronca said.

"Does everyone realize these people we are dealing with all have timeframes?" he said. "They are all spending time and money and now they are sitting there wondering what's going to happen."