

Reflections on Southside Bethlehem, Part 2: “Ten years ago, there was nothing here”

The Bethlehem Gadfly Affordable Housing, Neighborhoods, Southside June 14, 2019

(Second in a 5-part series of posts on the Southside by Anna Smith)

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Gadfly:

“Ten years ago, there was nothing here”

This refrain is a classic remark at grand openings and ribbon cuttings throughout the Southside these days. I know *why* it is used—perhaps there was nothing here that attracted *your* attention, money, or time. However, as a lifelong resident, it’s hard not to take this personally; *I* was here. My family was here. We shopped, ate at restaurants, went to school, and played at parks here ten years ago.

We erase the livelihoods of thousands with a single phrase when we speak of development as if it has occurred on a blank canvas. Development never occurs in a vacuum—“nothing” may have been a vacant lot where neighborhood kids played or a makeshift community garden. Good, bad, or somewhere in between, I doubt it was nothing. In fact, there was a reason that someone chose to invest in this area to begin

with—if there were nothing here, why would you spend time and money to build something new here?

History and perspective matter, and they inform the decisions we make and our evaluations of their potential impact. I don't expect someone who doesn't live in my neighborhood to truly understand its assets (how could they?), but I do expect them to try. Listening is a good place to start.

Anna

In these first two posts, Anna nails something important to me as I think of the “divide” between CPs Negron and Callahan on visions of the Southside. I tend to use their expressed views as my frame of reference. What I hear in BC is measuring change “in investment dollars, new construction, jobs created, businesses opened—the bigger the numbers, the better.” ON measures change in a totally different way (though in her long remarks at the last Council meeting, she is certainly appreciative of and even proud of some of the things that BC talks about). “Listening is a good place to start.” Yes.