

Jeff Parks: “It is time . . . to step up and create a vision for Bethlehem’s continued success”

The Bethlehem Gadfly Northside October 11, 2020

 *Latest in a series of posts about Northside* 

With the beginning of election season and a mayoral campaign not all that far off now, it is good to see people talking about **visions** for the City. Something to galvanize our attention, stir our enthusiasm. Gadfly hopes they are not all totally economic visions, though. He'd like to see **anti-racism** part of the package. Who's got the courage for that? Yes, time to step up and lay out what we want to see for our city. Let the vision games begin.

Selections from Jeffrey Parks, “Your View by Musikfest founder: We have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to consider future of North Side Bethlehem.” Morning Call, October 11, 2020.

Each generation of the Christmas City has faced unique challenges, forging ahead with visions that have created the 21st century community that is thriving.

From the late 1940s to the 1990s, foresighted leaders created a plan, and from it developed the parkland in the Monocacy Valley, Sand Island, Lehigh Canal Towpath, the Sun Inn and its courtyard, Historic Bethlehem Museums and Sites, Burnside Plantation, City Center Complex, Victorian streetscape on Main Street, Walnut Street Parking Garage, 11 story office tower and the Bethlehem Plaza Mall, across Walnut Street from the garage (originally intended as an indoor mall to compete with retail malls being constructed at the time).

Between 1990 and 2015, with the closing of the Bethlehem Steel plant, the community switched focus to the much-neglected South Side. Over 25 projects have transformed this retail district into the South Side Arts District.

The pending removal of the Walnut Street Garage offers Bethlehem a once-in-a-generation opportunity to consider the future of the North

Side downtown, which like most downtowns is experiencing extreme challenges as a result of the pandemic.

The ambitions of the 1960s plan for office towers and massive retail were never realized. But the focus on historic preservation and culture supported the modest retail district and its neighboring residential area. The new challenges of 2020 for all downtowns are whether there is need for office space, and what is the future of retail?

Bethlehem has attracted its fair share of small technology businesses, many of which are related to Lehigh and the Ben Franklin Technology Partners program. Creative businesses are attracted to culturally vibrant neighborhoods.

Bethlehem also continues to attract residents because of its quality of life, which includes arts, culture and recreation as well as an abundance of restaurants and specialty shops. While offices and office towers will not disappear, it is safe to say that many more people will have distance working opportunities, which means they can live where they choose.

Herein lies a great opportunity.

Just as they did in the 1950s, it is time for Bethlehem's elected leaders, the Redevelopment Authority and the Parking Authority to coordinate a new plan for the North Side downtown with input from the community. The plan should involve the land where the Walnut Street Parking Garage sits, and, perhaps, the ill-fated and underutilized Bethlehem Plaza Mall, a privately owned property.

A concept that incorporates parking (some of which may be underground) and residential mixed with some specialty retail/restaurant and perhaps educational/cultural programming (Moravian College's theater and music departments come to mind, as does ArtsQuest's "maker space" in the proposed new Banana Factory).

There are several investors who have purchased properties very near this site, including the Skyline West apartment project in which I am a partner. A mixed-use project that is an attraction to draw additional residents to the downtown would provide incentive for these investors to

move forward on projects that could add hundreds of new residential units to the North Side downtown along the Broad Street corridor.

As with much of what has happened in the last 70 years, public investment in such a project is needed to incentivize substantially more private investment. With such an investment already committed to a parking garage, it is not a stretch to consider a project that will have far more positive impact.

There are other aspects of the 1960s plan that need revision, as well. Linden, Center and Church streets were all made one-way in the 1960s to accommodate shift workers at the steel plant. Today, the one-way major streets disrupt a desirable urban neighborhood.

Linden Street has the opportunity to once again become a thriving neighborhood business district lined with Latino restaurants, shops and service businesses, and Church and Center streets, both of which are primarily residential, will stop being drag strips.

Bethlehem's City Center Complex was designed with a public plaza that is seldom used as an assembly space but could become a neighborhood/city park. The massive wall facing the Fahy Bridge could become a southern entrance to the plaza with steps and/or elevator. And why not a restaurant/ice cream/coffee shop where we can enjoy the view of South Mountain and the South Side, rather than a wall with warning signs to stay off it?

It is time for the community and our government leaders to step up and create a vision for Bethlehem's continued success. We are blessed with two very different, and very successful, downtowns.

Like all successful things, they need to be refreshed and adjusted for changing times. With the North Side downtown, there is an opportunity to seize this moment, attract hundreds of new residents and continue Bethlehem's record of thriving in a constantly changing world.