

# Disincentivize student-housing conversions on the Southside: change the definition of “family”

The Bethlehem Gadfly Affordable Housing, Neighborhoods, Southside July 27, 2019

*(The latest in a series of posts on the Southside and Neighborhoods)*

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## **YOUR VIEW: Student housing conversions harming Bethlehem’s South Side**

**Morning Call, July 27, 2019.**

In the late 1980s, Bethlehem revised its zoning code to allow up to five unrelated individuals to be recognized as a family and live in one housing unit. According to Jeffrey R. Zettlemoyer, who at that time was the fair housing and labor compliance officer for the city, the increase was an incentive for more student housing conversions.

Most recently, a developer expressed a desire to replace four single-family homes on Bethlehem’s 1st Terrace with student housing consisting of two four-unit houses with five bedrooms in each unit. Similar conversions over the years have had a profoundly negative impact on the South Side.

If one were to time-travel back to the mid-1980s prior to the zoning revision, and drive the streets of the core residential section of the South Side, streets such as Carlton, Montclair, Birkel, Vine, Webster, Polk, Morton, Summit, Fillmore, Thomas, Taylor, Adams, Hillside and Pierce, you would see predominantly well-kept pristine single-family homes

resplendent with grass green yards of flower and vegetable gardens and well-appointed porches.

Taking that trip today would reveal houses with large placards stating “Student Housing,” backyards with macadam surfaces to allow for overflow parking, alleys such as Boyce and Boyer streets appearing to be massive parking lots and two or three industrial-sized refuse containers on sidewalks before most houses.

Sidewalks are littered with cups and food containers after loud weekend parties. Bed sheets with messages are strung from second-story windows rallying athletic teams to victory over rivals, creating a college campus atmosphere on the city streets. A rather depressing annual sight is to see groups of people scavenging through piles of discards left by students who have departed for summer vacation. The absence of students and the absence of cars parked on the street gives some streets the appearance of a deserted city.

How do other communities in our state that are homes to institutes of higher learning address the student housing issue? Easton, with Lafayette College, State College, home of Penn State and Radnor Township, home to Villanova University and two other colleges are located, are examples where the number of unrelated individuals in their family zoning code definition is limited to three.

Calls to change this discrepancy of a family have been presented on a number of occasions before Bethlehem City Council. In an article published in the opinion section of this newspaper on September 4, 2012, I called for Bethlehem to revisit its zoning ordinance. The city has ignored all requests.

Bethlehem has commissioned a number of studies, such as the Sasaki Report, to determine best city designs. The consensus of most studies

was that the single family home was the key ingredient for stability. Bethlehem's planning officer should consider amending the family definition to reflect the wisdom of other college community planners.

Stephen

*Gadfly #1 hits another home run.*