

# Martin Tower plans at Planning Commission today: the background (11)

The Bethlehem Gadfly Martin Tower, Serious Issues April 11, 2019

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(11th in a series on Martin Tower)

*Initial sketch plans for Martin Tower site at Planning Commission  
4PM today Thursday April 11 Town Hall  
Martin Tower demolition May 19*

Gadfly was in another life in 2015. But the Martin Tower issue was all over the news in the last half of that year.

Martin Tower had lain long without action, languishing on the tax rolls, a prime location not utilized. The City proposed rezoning to “jump-start” development.

Meetings were several. Meetings were long. Meetings were jam-packed. Meetings were “hot.”

Meetings were described as “boisterous” and raucous.”

Martin Tower was a major public issue.

The major concerns with the City proposal included whether to demolish the Tower or not, the effect of commercial development on our current two downtowns, the large percent of the CRIZ granted to the project, possible traffic problems, the burden on the school district from heavy residential growth, lack of transparency by the developers, back-room dealing by the Administration, campaign contributions to Council members.

City Council ultimately approved the rezoning, permitting but not mandating demolition of the Tower with limitation on retail space aimed at the concern for creating a competing third business area.

Where are we now?

- Martin Tower is coming down May 19

- Developer plans for the entire site are being presented today – for the first time – to the Planning Commission
- This is an initial review of plans; no vote

What should “we” be looking out for?

- Since the developers have been basically silent all the way, we should be curious about all aspects of their plan.
- the retail space: since the fear of creating a third downtown was the strongest objection. Did the “compromise” limitation on retail space work? Will the business community accept it?

Now there are other elements of this process that Gadfly might take up (comparison with other CRIZ cities, campaign contributions, back-rooming), but right now he is very anxious to see the plans and hear stakeholder responses.

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Timeline: information mainly from *Morning Call* files.

**2001:** Bethlehem Steel declares Bankruptcy.

**2007:** Developers Herrick and Ronca (HR) receive approval for a mostly residential community in Martin Tower (MT), a project shelved when the housing economy collapses in 2008. The property is in an office and research district created for Bethlehem Steel with a neighborhood overlay, requested by the developers, allowing homes and some commercial space as long as MT is retained.

**2010:** MT receives Historic Landmark designation (at developer’s request) to be eligible for tax credits.

**2013:** Bethlehem receives a City Revitalization and Improvement Zone (CRIZ) designation of 130 acres, which allows developers to use certain state and local taxes to pay off construction loans. The MT site occupies 53 of the 103 acres.

**2013:** The City removes MT from a list of historic landmarks protected from demolition.

**July 10, 2015:** Planning Commission (PC): To spur languishing development, the City proposes to rezone the MT site from research use/office use/residential development to a mix of uses: residential/office/commercial. The proposed new ordinance does not require that MT be retained and thus would allow MT to be demolished.

Concerns include:

- demolition of the iconic MT
- creation of a third, competing downtown subsidized by taxpayers
- allocation of such a high percentage of the CRIZ to the MT project instead of to the downtowns

The PC tables the proposal, recommending revision to ensure that the entire site cannot be retail.

**August 13, 2015: Planning Commission:** The PC approves 3-2 a proposal to rezone the MT site as mixed-use but limiting the amount of retail space and with no requirement to keep MT (but not mandating demolition).

*City Council in 2015 was Bryan Callahan, Eric Evans, Michael Recchiuetti, Cathy Reuscher, J. William Reynolds, Louis Stellato, Adam Waldron.*

**October 6, 2015: Public hearing:** 4-hr, standing-room only crowd, marked by petition against the re-zoning proposal by 50 downtown businesses (no 3<sup>rd</sup> downtown) and request that some City Council members recuse themselves because of campaign contributions from developers. Lack of direct testimony from developers (no plan) is also raised.

**October 20, 2015: City Council (CC):** “Over intense opposition from downtown merchants,” CC approved the zoning change 6-1 at first reading with agreement to “massage the language” concerning the amount of retail space *after* it becomes law. Dominant concern by critics of the proposal is “fear that it would create a third downtown.” A lower cap on retail would meet that concern. There were again calls for recusals. Once again, the developers are silent about their plans, a point of some criticism. “Why would Council approve rezoning without knowing the developer’s plan for the site? Why did it vote for rezoning while simultaneously agreeing it should be amended?” (Barbara Diamond). Strong calls to limit retail space now not later.

**November 4, 2015: City Council:** In “an overture to disgruntled downtown merchants,” CC, voting 5-1, limits retail space to 380,000

square feet, necessitating sending the proposal back to the PC for consideration. The issue of campaign contributions leading to recusals was raised again in public commentary.

**December 7, 2015: Planning Commission:** The PC meeting is canceled on discovery of hitherto unknown City Administration contacts with the developer going back to the beginning of the year – contacts revealed by blogger Bernie O’Hare. The PC chair says discussion should have been done in “the light of day.”

**December 8, 2015: Public hearing:** The Administration is accused of “working behind closed doors” with the developers. “Corruption,” “ethics,” “integrity” are topics of commentary. Mayor charged with ignoring “near-unanimous train of residents.” The Mayor later presents a detailed defense of his proposal and the process behind it.

**December 15, 2015: City Council:** “Capping off a six-month raucous debate,” CC votes 6-1 to approve the rezoning with the 380,000 cap on retail. Same objections heard again. The Mayor defends self and Council defends him.

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