

Armistice on the Armory

The Bethlehem Gadfly Armory, Neighborhoods, West Side November 17, 2019

🌿 *Latest in a series of posts on the Armory* 🌿





The neighbors might not be totally happy — and for sure a “still deeply demoralized” Armory neighbor Jeff Pooley fired a last shot, looking back at 2017 and 2018 when the Zoning Hearing Board approved variances seemingly “over the objections of the entire neighborhood” and making “a mockery of the zoning code” — but peace apparently has come to the dispute over development of the Armory.

Jeff Pooley:

Last Thursday the Planning Commission approved plans from Peron for the development of the Armory site on the West Side, ending about three years of discussion, some of which was quite tension-filled.

Former Mayor John Callahan, Director of Development for Peron, summarized the project, emphasizing that the plan is going forward under historical guidelines and has been presented to the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission — which was music to Gadfly’s ears.

John Callahan:

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At the meeting approximately a half-dozen residents asked questions, offered statements, and made constructive comments on such topics as parking, traffic, traffic visibility, bike parking, green space, appropriate trees, view blocking, environmental pollution, and walkability.

Concluding comments by the Commission members framed the project and the resident participation in positive terms, and Gadfly would especially call your attention to the comments by Mr. Malozi in the following clip, in which he finds “quite a lot of net positive for this type of project” (“urban infill,” “adaptive reuse of a historic structure,” “walkability,” desirable “density,” sufficient parking, safety, LANTA enhancements, traffic calming, possible boon to the downtown and feet on the street).

Planning Commission concluding statements:

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It just might be that Thursday marked the last meeting on a long and sometimes bumpy road.

But Gadfly says look for at least one more post as he reflects on this meeting and the planning process related to the Armory and development in Bethlehem in general.

Nicole Radzievich, “Redevelopment of Historic Bethlehem armory approved 3 years after it was proposed.” Morning Call, November 14, 2019.

The historic Floyd Simons armory in west Bethlehem would be recast as an artist’s studio and living space surrounded by 70 apartments, under plans the Planning Commission approved Thursday. The 10,000-square-foot drill hall would include a studio and apartment for painter and sculptor Emil Lukas and his wife, who now live in Stockertown.

In addition, the basement of the armory, which once housed a rifle range, would be converted to a fitness center, meeting rooms and other amenities, according to owners Peron Development.

The project would also include 70 apartments built in and around other armory structures at 345 Second Ave. That would include 64 units in four-story building attached to the former armory, and six apartments converted from two garage additions at the existing armory.

A portion of the area of Second Avenue that widens would be narrowed and a landscaped median installed to slow down traffic. There would be 101 parking spots available, and grassy patches would replace some stretches of macadam, producing a smaller impervious-surface footprint than what is there now.

In justifying his support for the land development and subdivision approval, Planning Commission member Matthew Malozi said the project contains a lot of the themes the city has been pushing: historic redevelopment, walkability, and the density of housing near the downtown.

Jeff Pooley, who lives on Prospect Avenue near the armory, questioned, among other things, why the off-street parking is close to the street like a suburban strip mall. Modern urban design, he said call for buildings to be closer to the street and parking behind.

According to the Historic Register nominating form, the art deco-style building is a good example of the structures designed for military training before World War II, and the architectural details would be retained in its reuse.