

Gadfly in a muddle over 548

The Bethlehem Gadfly 548 N. New St., Neighborhoods, Northside, Serious Issues September 16, 2019

(9th in a series of posts about 548 N. New St.)

So the Planning Commission response to the proposal for a new building at 548 N. New St. saddened a reflective Gadfly in a different manner for a different reason.

There was no one Planning Commission position on the 548 design, but here is what Gadfly pieced together a couple of posts back from separate comments on the design by the three commissioners.

This is what Gadfly “heard” as a general rationale for approving the design:

548 is not in the historical district, which means that it’s not tied to the past but can be a catalyst for elevating and exciting and even beneficially controversial change, an indication of our commitment to modern progress that will benefit the City economically by attracting urban dwellers who, in the developer’s language, want to “live free” and who will spend money in the downtown.

Gadfly is aware of the legitimate problems with what we might call the “Boyd Theater” block of Broad Street. And of optimism about plans for 120 new apartments there.

He shares that optimism.

For a personal and selfish motive, Gadfly — wrestling with the downsizing demon — would love to see apartments that he would like and can afford in that section of town.

The Planners base their approval of the design precisely on the basis that it will be a change agent in that area:

- “[548 is] not in the historical district”
- “This is a new development and *hopefully the rest will follow*”
- “The design is going *to elevate* the architecture in the surrounding 70s-designed buildings in the future”
- “It’s going to improve our overall outlook and image in terms of *where we’re going and moving toward*”

The Planners have Gadfly envisioning this section of the future City in the image and likeness of the 548 style of architecture.

So which is it? Does the modern design of 548 blend in with and complement the historical architecture, as the developers see it? Or is it something new, a consciously chosen break with historical architecture that signals a move in a new direction, as the Planners see it?

Not only which is it, but which do we want it to be?

It’s the dramatic inconsistency of the two messages that bothers Gadfly.

In contrast to the developers, The PC celebrates difference and change and assumes more of it.

It almost sounds as if there is an official plan or consensus evolving of the kind of downtown residents we seek and the kind of downtown development we want.

In approving such dramatic change in architectural design, are the Planners in ad hoc fashion making policy, or are they reflecting principles already agreed upon?

Gadfly has heard the kind of residents we seek (“the type of clientele that we’re trying to have within our City”) as young professionals with disposable income who want to live and spend money in a walkable downtown.

And he guesses the assumption is that such folk will only be attracted by such modern design. Is that a testable assumption?

For it sounds from the PC words like we are moving toward a city with a distinct historical section and a distinct modern section.

Gadfly agrees generally that history is Bethlehem’s brand. So will we have a competing brand? Can a city have two brands?

Carrell-Smith felt baffled. Gadfly feels muddled.

And thus for Gadfly the key question is, where and when does the conversation about Beauty in Bethlehem take place, and who is there when it does?

For by the time that Scheirer and Carrell-Smith get thoughtfully to the microphone, it is too late. That’s what made Gadfly sad. The conversation train had left the station.

Gadfly hopes that conversation is taking place somewhere before the train has gone too far.

For this specific kind of comment from a Planning Commissioner really makes Gadfly anxious: “if nothing else, people who visit Bethlehem will have something more to talk about.”

O, my.

That does not seem responsible planning.

to be continued . . . (Gadfly can really beat a topic to death, can't he?)