

The proposed short-term lodging ordinance: “a balancing act between protecting neighborhoods and individual property rights”

The Bethlehem Gadfly Airbnb, Short term lodging March 9, 2020

 *Latest in a series of posts on Airbnb and short-term lodging* 

City Council held a public hearing on the short-term lodging issue March 3. Once again, Sara provides us with a good overview of the hearing. Note the contribution by Gadfly follower Kate McVey.

Sara K. Satullo, “Is Bethlehem going too far to restrict Airbnb rentals? Council and some residents aren’t sure.” Lehighvalleylive.com, March 8, 2020.

For 30 years, Kate McVey’s lived in her four-bedroom home steps from Moravian College’s campus, taking great pride in her Bethlehem home. With room to spare, McVey’s discovered that renting a single room on Airbnb helps her keep her home updated and her bills paid.

“I’d like to think I am a good neighbor,” McVey told Bethlehem’s City Council last week. Her guests have spanned all ages, exposing her to wonderful people in town for a job interview or a special event, she said. Folks often Uber from the airport or bus station and don’t take up a parking spot on Lorain Avenue where parking can be at a premium, McVey said.

McVey was one of three Airbnb hosts who spoke at a city council hearing Tuesday on a [proposed zoning ordinance](#) to share their concerns about a proposal to more [tightly regulate the city’s](#) short-term rental market. Bethlehem’s trying to rein in the practice of investors snatching up properties in the Historic District solely for renting them on home sharing sites like VRBO, Airbnb and HomeAway.

But residents and some members of council expressed concerns that the restrictions might go too far and inhibit legitimate home-sharing efforts, which the city says it doesn’t want to discourage. “This is a tourist city,” Councilwoman Grace Crampsie Smith said. The quality of life for

residents is paramount, but it is a shame a “few bad apples” are ruining the process, Crampsie Smith said.

Under the proposed changes, a homeowner must be living in their property, present for all rentals and renting no more than two rooms. A home could not be rented for more than 30 consecutive nights under the proposal and the city requires annual licensing and inspections. The proposed zoning change also requires two off-street parking spaces per home and a third space if two rooms are rented. This does not apply to homes in the central business district, per the proposal.

Councilman Bryan Callahan opposes investors offering up city properties on home-sharing websites, but he has no problem with a resident renting their house for a month while they are on vacation, he said.

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Councilman J. William Reynolds called this a balancing act between protecting neighborhoods and individual property rights. Much of it depends on how a judge interprets the regulations, he said. It will be very difficult to prove someone is renting their owner-occupied home when they are away, Reynolds said.

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