

Trying to nail down the Martin Tower developer

The Bethlehem Gadfly Martin Tower May 2, 2021

 *Latest in a series of posts on Martin Tower* 

Bethlehem is not where we were in 1994. This City is now in a position of strength.

Councilwoman Van Wirt

I am not overwhelmingly encouraged by what I've seen thus far.
President Waldron

What is it that you are able to do if I was the developer and I said I don't

want to do these things?
Councilman Reynolds

It's our role as Council to . . . help represent the community to say that these things are important based on conversations with members of the public that

have been ongoing for years.
President Waldron

ref: **The Martin Tower site — almost two years later**

ref: **Martin Tower addendum**

ref: **Martin Tower developers request parking limitation exception at Planning this afternoon**

ref: **The tweaking of the Martin Tower site plan begins**

ref: **Martin Tower site: “we want it done the right way”**

ref: **Martin Tower proposal significantly interrogated at Council**

Martin Tower's on the City Council agenda for Tuesday night.

The developers are proposing a Zoning text amendment relative to parking and traffic flow that Gadfly, as you might remember, thought of relatively minor significance from the way it earlier flew through the Planning Commission.

Not so.

Several Council members at the public hearing on April 20 addressed the specific proposal on the table, but the more important thing that happened was that said proposal opened the door to a more general discussion of the Martin Tower project.

The proposed buildings on the old Martin Tower site face 8th Avenue in deference to the end users' (e.g., St. Luke's) desire for greater visibility. The original design proposes one traffic lane and one parking lane across the front. The amendment would permit the developer latitude to increase that area however he liked. The City Planning Bureau is not in favor of the amendment. Nor the Lehigh Valley Planning Commission.

At the earlier Planning Commission (not Planning Bureau) meeting, the developers said that this narrow and relatively insignificant (in their eyes) proposal was the first of a series of tweaks they would be proposing now that we are coming out of the pandemic (O, god, please!) and construction on the project is about ready to begin.

At the public hearing on the amendment April 20, some Councilpeople questioned this specific amendment on the table, but some were obviously looking for more general information on the project as well as wary of giving the developer too much freedom.

For instance, President Waldron almost immediately called attention to the significance of the night's discussion, explaining that "This may be one of Council's only opportunities to weigh in on the project and gain feedback from the public as far as what's going to happen on such an important large parcel in the heart of Bethlehem."

President Waldron was signifying that Council wanted eyes on the project because the eyes of the public were on them. He made the interesting point that there were two end users involved here that needed to be pleased, end users like St. Luke's on the business side and end users like us the residents of Bethlehem on the public policy side.

In a previous post Gadfly used the term "interrogation" to describe Council's mood at that April 20 Public Hearing, a mood no better exemplified than in the muscular tone of Councilwoman Van Wirt's virtual lecture to both City Hall and the developer. Give a listen:

“Whenever I come across a privately requested zoning text amendment, my guard goes up. . . . Bethlehem is not where we were in 1994. This City is now in a position of strength. And I feel that there is a Golden mean that we have to find where we have appropriate development that respects our zoning code, that respects our walkability, and our need to de-emphasize motor travel and transportation, and especially strive to decrease the sea of asphalt that we see on our roads. We want development to happen at Martin Tower but not at the expense of our zoning and our quality of life. I feel that we must try harder. I feel that when developers come to our administration and our Department of Community and Economic Development that every single effort will be made to insure that new development respects our historical districts, our zoning codes, our walkability, but also will negotiate with the developer prior to coming for any requests to obtain the very best deal and maximum benefit for the citizens and not the developer. This is what I expect of the Administration and City Council, I believe, will hold to these standards, and I feel that there really is a good solution here, and it’s called good design. And I think that’s what we need to be asking of our developers before they come and ask for exemptions from our zoning codes.”

The discussion got really interesting when Councilman Reynolds — naming big picture topics like timeline, the look of the project, the design — said there were “lots of questions” about the project. Indeed, he coaxed a list of City priorities for the project out of the Mayor, a list that included shared parking, reduced impervious coverage, attention to a walkable community, replacement of trees, the view, handling of stormwater, enhancement of the trail network, green space, recreation space, decertifying Criz acreage, and affordable housing. Listen in:

All good stuff. Followers will recognize items on this list. We’ve all made lists. One of Gadfly’s is [here](#). Scott Slingerland’s is [here](#).

So we could make a list of the lists.

And Councilman Reynolds, channeling us no doubt, then asked the City where “we” were on securing the achievement of those items and, more to the point, “what is it that you are able to do if I was the developer and I said I don’t want to do these things?”

Big question.

Good question.

Can we trust the developer to have good ears?

What recourse do we have if he doesn't?

Councilman Reynolds wasn't satisfied with the vagueness of the response. He had to ask the question twice.

Solicitor Spirk was incorporated into the discussion.

The end result of which was that though Council could stipulate a list of priorities for the developer to achieve, Council could not enforce such a list.

Drat.

But the City might well do it.

Someone turned on the fog machine.

Would the City sit down with the developer and nail down these priorities?

Yes, if the developer was willing.

Gadfly listened, but he heard no response from the developer.

President Waldron — “not overwhelmingly encouraged by what I've seen thus far” — and doing yeoman work for us, tried to arrange not only a meeting between the City and the developer to agree on priorities but also the production of a written agreement as the end result of such meeting.

A written agreement. Some basis for some accountability.

That daring suggestion/request hung in the air as the Public Hearing ended.

What will happen Tuesday night if such written agreement is produced?

Perhaps more importantly, what will happen if it is not?

The history of the Martin Tower saga refuses to be written yet.