

Proposed zoning ordinance dusts off the Airbnb issue

The Bethlehem Gadfly Airbnb, Neighborhoods, Northside, Serious Issues, Short term lodging, Uncategorized December 16, 2019

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

Short-term lodging, short-term rentals, home-sharing: sometimes conveniently referred to by the short-hand of Airbnb, the company with which this practice is most associated.

Airbnb locations in Bethlehem

“The Uber of the hospitality market, Airbnb acts as an online broker, connecting people who need a place to stay with hosts who have a spare bedroom, apartment or a full house to rent.”

The Airbnb issue is before us again. It's been out of sight for over a year. Brought back by a proposal introduced at the Planning Commission December 12 for a change in the zoning code to complement an ordinance passed last year.

We're going to spend several posts on this proposal. So it's time to refresh ourselves on the background.

Click [Airbnb under Topics](#) on the right-hand Gadfly sidebar for access to previous posts.

For a deep background timeline, see: [The Airbnb Controversy \(1\)](#)

Though the roots of this controversy long precede Gadfly-becoming-Gadfly, the issue seems to have begun with neighbors' reacting to a specific Bethlehem couple in the Northside historical district renting their home (and then homes) on a short-term basis.

In the next post we will want to ask why all of us should be attentive to what's happening in one section of the City.

Charles Malinchak, "Bethlehem planners delay recommendations on short-term lodging changes." Morning Call, December 13, 2019.

Bethlehem is considering a proposal to regulate short-term rentals — akin to renting rooms or whole houses to overnight guests — in its zoning code for the first time. While the city has an ordinance to license such uses, the new ordinance would actually spell out in what zoning districts they can be.

The proposed changes are in a zoning amendment aimed at what is being called "short-term lodging" which the commission discussed, but members determined at least two sections of the regulations need to be fine-tuned. The two questions the commission requested be looked into further were how many days per year the home or room can be rented and what zoning districts should the activity be permitted.

According to a copy of the proposal, a short-term lodging facility is a single family home occupied by the owner who rents no more than two bedrooms for up to 30 days. The home would not be licensed as a hotel or a bed and breakfast and no exterior alterations or expansions of the home would be permitted to expand the rental operation, according to the amendment. The areas where the rental activity would be permitted or with a special exception permit include the following zoning districts: rural residential, single family residential and medium and high density residential.

Hotel Bethlehem Co-Partner and city resident Bruce Haines told the Planning Commission that the amendment doesn't really mesh with an existing ordinance regulating housing. "The point is, these places need to be single family homes where the visitor has access to the entire house like the kitchen, living room and dining room," he said after the meeting. One of the problems, he said, is that several homes in the center city historic district are already operating under the pretense of short-term lodging but are actually apartments with no access to the rest of the house.

The commission will continue discussion of the issue and possibly make recommendations at its January meeting. Those recommendations would be forwarded to City Council. The city began looking at the zoning issue after the Pennsylvania Supreme Court case earlier this year that ruled in favor a Monroe County municipality's zoning of short-term lodging. The city's current licensing ordinance is under appeal in Northampton County Court.

The ordinance was created after residents complained about the houses being rented out in their neighborhoods. Critics say they have no problem with homeowners licensed to rent out a bedroom or their house to overnight guests, but oppose investors buying homes for that sole purpose, creating a commercial intrusion into their neighborhood.

to be continued . . .