

The Mayor's answer to the South Bethlehem Historical Society: A teachable moment

The Bethlehem Gadfly Affordable Housing, Neighborhoods, Serious Issues, Southside July 2, 2019

(The latest in a series of posts on the Southside and Neighborhoods)

The backstory:

Gadfly can't depend on his followers "following" the streams of his thoughts. So let's just recall two recent time marks that continue to disturb the calm waters of his retirement.

1) The [letter to the Mayor and City Council about the impact of "progress" on the Southside](#) from the South Bethlehem Historical Society delivered by president Lou James at the May 22 Council meeting.

2) [Councilwoman Negron's emotionally powerful response to that letter](#) at the June 4 Council meeting in which one of the two problems she identified was lack of affordable housing on the Southside.

Here in full is the Mayor's June 12 response to SBHS.



CITY OF BETHLEHEM

10 East Church Street, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania 18018-6025

MAYOR'S OFFICE

Phone: 610-865-7100

Fax: 610-865-7257

TDD: 610-865-7257

www.bethlehem-pa.gov

rdonchez@bethlehem-pa.gov

Robert J. Donchez
Mayor

June 12, 2019

Louis James, President
South Bethlehem Historical Society
P.O. Box 5106
Bethlehem, PA 18015

Dear Mr. James,

I wanted to acknowledge receipt of your letter dated May 22, 2019. I also hope you understand that there is a process that each developer has to go through prior to the demolition, rehabilitation, construction of a particular project. There are various City departments, boards, authorities and commissions that assist with development in the City of Bethlehem often paying close attention to the historical nature of the site and the potential impact the development will have on neighborhoods.

I would also like to make you aware of a program that will have an impact on the affordable housing situation. The program is called Neighborhood Works and is a revolving fund to rehabilitate homes in South Bethlehem that need substantial repairs. These homes will be sold to low/moderate income, first time homebuyers, and the proceeds from the sale will go back into the trust to rehabilitate additional homes.

As one who was raised in South Bethlehem, I want to thank you for your letter and rest assured, that even as Bethlehem continues to progress, we haven't lost site of the wonderful history of our City.

Sincerely,

Robert J. Donchez
Mayor

Cc: City Council

Hoping to not sound overly dramatic, Gadfly is starting to sense somewhat of a "crisis" in regard to affordable housing on the Southside.

(Some of you will rightfully say, "where have you been, Gadfly. Get your head out from under your wing.")

And wondering why there isn't something like a "task force" addressing it.

The fact that Councilman Callahan spoke at the June 4 meeting of “teaming” with Councilwoman Negron to encourage developers to provide affordable housing would seem to indicate that there either is no such plan in operation now or that if there is such a plan, it is not widely recognized.

We have just been through an election. And “affordable housing” was liberally sprinkled throughout the campaign rhetoric, always receiving appreciative nods. But no one mentioned a plan. Words are easy. And when the polls close, they can be forgotten.

Gadfly doesn’t remember affordable housing on the Southside making it into the Mayor’s State of the City address.

Affordable housing on the Southside sounds to Gadfly like it should be at the top of somebody’s agenda. Somebody who cares about the character of the Southside. Somebody with power.

Who will mobilize the “wide-range of coordinated strategies implemented simultaneously by public and private actors” that Anna envisions? Who will forge the “public and private partnerships” Dana speaks of?

It sounds like no minor undertaking.

The SBHS letter provided a teachable moment in regard to affordable housing, not just for SBHS but the “us” at large. The Mayor references the Neighborhood Works program but misses the opportunity to provide much more in the way of details that would effectively make the general public feel confident that a (hoping not to be overly dramatic) “crisis” is being addressed.

Gadfly for one would like to hear much more about Neighborhood Works, about the problems the City faces in improving the stock of affordable housing on the Southside, and about where affordable housing on the Southside sits on the City's list of things to do.