

# Banana Factory Expansion: “It’ll bear watching” (3)

The Bethlehem Gadfly Banana Factory Expansion, Serious Issues September 18, 2018

*(3rd in a series of posts on Banana Factory Expansion )*

*Dana Grubb is a lifelong resident of the City of Bethlehem who worked 27 years for the City of Bethlehem in the department of community and economic development, as sealer of weights and measures, housing rehabilitation finance specialist, grants administrator, acting director of community and economic development and deputy director of community development.*

Dear Gadfly:

Attending the Historic Conservation Commission (HCC) in town hall this evening, I was struck by the fact that two issues before the HCC involved the demolition of structures in the SS Conservation District, which is a national register historic district under local ordinance review and protection.

The organizations requesting a Certificate of Appropriateness were the Hispanic Center and ArtsQuest, both important community non-profits who benefit residents with services and programming.

The HCC approved the Hispanic Center’s request to demolish a former residence fronting West Fourth Street in the 500 block. A certificate of appropriateness will now go to City Council for their vote of approval. It is a very worthwhile project.

The second demolition proposal comes from ArtsQuest, a request to demolish most of the Banana Factory structure and replace it with a four story 70’ tall structure in what is now the Banana Factory parking lot. Programming demand has outstripped their facility and analysis has determined that this is the best way to go for ArtsQuest. It’s a great project, but it’s also another demolition request. Analysis of the project by the city’s historic officer determined that much of the proposal is

inappropriate based on the US Secretary of Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation, which must be applied under both state law and the local ordinance.

Many ArtsQuest supporters spoke in support of the project due to its programming benefit. I spoke about demolition concerns, why ArtsQuest needs parking on site with two parking garages within a half block, and the scale of the proposed new building compared to the existing Banana Factory. After reviewing [the ArtsQuest submission on the city's website](#), I noted that it failed to address its impact on the viewscape of the SS Conservation District.

The bigger issue is demolition. Each project that asks for it in the SS Conservation District makes it seem fine on its own with minimal impact. The problem becomes the sum of various demolitions that are required to advance projects and their cumulative impact on this national register historic district.

Do we as a community want to promote and preserve our physical history, or do we want to compromise it? There are no easy answers and the political pressures that are brought to bear can make it difficult for the citizen volunteers on the HCC, who are strictly ordained to deal with historic appropriateness.

Fortunately tonight's session with ArtsQuest representatives was more one of fact-finding, seeking feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of their proposal.

It'll bear watching by the public as further sessions happen, and Bethlehem decides just how important history is to a town where history is its most important and marketable asset.

Dana