

The tweaking of the Martin Tower site plan begins

The Bethlehem Gadfly Martin Tower March 12, 2021

 *Latest in a series of posts on Martin Tower* 

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](#)

The Planning Commission recommended three “tweaks” to the Martin Tower site design last night and passed them on to City Council for final approval.

The City had “urged” that one of the tweaks — to allow more parking in front of buildings — not be approved, but there seemed to be no contention, and the three change were approved without controversy.

We can look forward to a series of such meetings as the developer brings forward requested changes to the original plan that was approved a year or two ago.

Gadfly notes that the number of apartments has been scaled back from 500+ to about 300, though this was not a discussion point last night.

Gadfly found the most interesting part of the meeting public Comment from Scott Slingerland and the ensuing discussion with PC chair Melosky and developer Ronca.

Gadfly will post on this interchange in a separate post.

But nothing out of the ordinary last night that Gadfly could see. And Scott is keeping some important issues of interest to us in the air.

selections from Christina Tatu, “Nearly two years after demolition, development progressing at former Martin Tower site.” Morning Call, March 12, 2021.

Nearly two years after Martin Tower was demolished in an implosion that could be heard for miles and drew thousands of onlookers, the owners of the property are seeking zoning changes that would allow them to proceed with development of the 53-acre former Bethlehem Steel site.

At Thursday night's Bethlehem Planning Commission meeting, planners unanimously recommended approval of zoning amendments that would allow for the expansion of a three-way signalized intersection on Eighth Avenue and for more parking between medical offices proposed for the site, and decrease rear-yard setbacks from 30 feet to 20 feet.

The latest plans show some changes from the ones narrowly approved by planners in April 2019. . . . At that time, the developer was proposing a trio of office buildings — at least two of them medical — near Eighth and Eaton avenues where there are similar offices. There were to be 528 garden-style apartments, rising three stories high, on either side of the property. A gas station and convenience store, a 132-room hotel, a restaurant and up to two retail stores were also proposed.

The latest plan shows 10 buildings. It reduces the number of apartments to about 300 units, Wagner said.

The plan also includes two three-story medical offices and a 31,000-square-foot grocery store along Eighth Avenue. There's a three-story professional building along Eaton Avenue, a one-story office building and 130-room hotel. The plan also calls for two restaurants and a gas station and convenience store on the southwest corner of the property.

The developers anticipate construction could start by the end of the year, but they still need to submit land development plans for the project. City Council will vote on Thursday night's recommendations at their meeting on April 20.

Ronca was asking to put more parking in front of the buildings on Eighth and Eaton avenues.

To limit parking lots along major roads, the current zoning restricts parking spaces between a commercial building and the street to one driving aisle and one row of spaces.

Ronca argued in a Feb. 15 letter to the city that the rules create poor vehicle flow around the medical offices. They would also require most of the parking be behind the buildings, creating access issues for patrons, most of whom would be elderly and would be required to walk a great distance to get into the facilities.

It would also result in the loss of parking spaces, including required handicapped spaces adjacent to the entrance of the grocery store.

selections from Sara K. Satullo, “Martin Tower redevelopment construction could start by the end of 2021.” leheighvalleylive.com, March 11. 2021.

The developers are asking the city to tweak the zoning rules governing the redevelopment of the former Bethlehem Steel Corp. world headquarters to allow for more parking near proposed medical buildings, the addition of a new Eighth Avenue entrance and a slightly denser development. . . .

The commission voted unanimously to recommend Bethlehem City Council endorse all three changes, despite the city planning department’s advice to reject the request to allow more parking in front of the buildings. City council is set to hold an April 20 public hearing on the matter.

Board Chairman Rob Melosky emphasized to the public that Thursday night’s vote was just a zoning text amendment recommendation, not project approval. Those more detailed plans will receive careful review from the commission, he said.

“This tract of land is something we take very serious and we want it done the right way,” Melosky said.

The original master plan shows eight buildings plus an apartment complex. The new submitted plans show 10 buildings, although not all of them are labeled.

The plans show a grocery store along Eighth Avenue along with two three-story medical buildings and a three-story office building along Eaton. There is now a one-story office building next to the one-story 130-

room hotel and two restaurants where one is proposed in the master plan. The gas station and convenience store remain as well as another building.

City Planning Director Darlene Heller told the commission the requests were pretty straight forward. The city took no issue with reducing lot setbacks or with making the three-way signalized intersection at Plaza Drive — where the CVS and other St. Luke's medical buildings sit — a four-way signalized intersection.

But Heller did urge the commission to require the bulk of parking to be to the interior portion of the lot. She noted in a feedback letter that the majority of the neighboring buildings were developed prior to 2012 zoning design guidelines.

Ultimately, the commission voted to allow the parking tweaks, noting they learned from St. Luke's Eaton Avenue building that this is a common request from medical users.