

Last step before the voting on the ordinance to regulate student housing

The Bethlehem Gadfly Lehigh University, Southside February 4, 2021

 *The latest in a series of posts on the Southside* 

An important ordinance aimed at regulating student housing especially around Lehigh University is working its way through the City bureaucracy.

The genesis of this ordinance probably goes back twenty, maybe even thirty years and is associated with Gadfly #1 Stephen Antalic's grim depictions of the manifestly deleterious effect that the uncontrolled growth of student housing is having on traditional neighborhoods on the Southside around Lehigh University.

In recent years the chant for taking action to protect those neighborhoods and the quality of resident life therein is associated with Councilwoman Negrón.

And see powerful recent statements supporting this ordinance by Anna Smith [here](#) and [here](#).

In recent years DCED director Alicia Karner and Planning Director Darlene Heller have worked with all parties involved to bring the **“Student Housing Overlay District”** ordinance to the brink of a Council vote.

This student overlay ordinance proscribes a regulated geographical district of student housing. Current student housing outside that district is “grandfathered” as long as it continues to be licensed and inspected. New student housing outside the district is permissible but with fewer students allowed than housing inside the district.

Here from the ordinance itself is the statement of purpose:

SECTION 3. That in Article 1303 of the Zoning Ordinance titled Classification of Districts, Subsection 1303.07, Purposes of Each District, the following new Subsection is added:

- “(v) SH Student Housing and Student Home Overlay Zoning District – Because the student population brings vitality and economic stability to both downtowns, this overlay district is being created to address the locations of housing units occupied by multiple college students and related noise, litter, other nuisances, overcrowding, and parking problems. The purpose of this district is fourfold:
- To recognize that housing of college students often causes different challenges than housing for other persons.
 - To stabilize and protect neighborhoods throughout the City by providing for student housing, while maintaining the supply of housing that is affordable to families.
 - To promote the development of additional on-campus housing by colleges and universities within the Institutional Zoning District.
 - To direct concentrations of housing of college students to locations proximate to a college, and where public transit services are available, to minimize parking shortages and to reduce congestion.”

The proposed ordinance has received substantial recent attention: at a Community Development Committee meeting October 22 (many resident voices **for** the ordinance, a few **opposed**), at a Planning Commission Meeting, at City Council December 15.

And now substantial attention at a Public Hearing before the City Council meeting February 2, where landlord voices opposed to the ordinance predominated (**Council video** mins 28:00-1:01:50), questioning such things as the inadequately narrow size of the overlay, parking, and the nature of grandfathering. Here is an example of a **landlord comment**.

The familiar voices of Southside long-time residents Anne Evans and Seth Moglen were heard after the landlord calls. Gadfly always like to point you to models of effective resident commentary, and he suggests that you listen to these calls by Evans and Moglen countering the landlords by honing in on the important intention of the ordinance. **Evans** speaks of the need to protect the availability of affordable housing on the Southside, and **Moglen** urges Council to see that the landlord arguments to expand the overlay boundaries are precisely the reason the ordinance is needed.

As far as Gadfly can tell, Council sentiment has unanimously favored this ordinance at every step. Landlord questions were explored with the City

representatives Tuesday night, especially by Councilman Callahan, and all seemed to be resolved.

The ordinance will now appear on the City Council agenda for first reading and vote February 16.

Frankly, this feels like one of the most important actions by Council in the time that Gadfly has been Council-watching, and he hopes the ordinance succeeds as it seems destined to.

The Bethlehem Gadfly