

Emergency shelter for the homeless not permitted to open early

The Bethlehem Gadfly Neighborhoods, Northside, Serious Issues November 16, 2019

🌿 Latest in a series of posts about Northside neighborhoods 🌿

A post on the Next Door Mauch Chunk blog urges residents to attend the November 19 City Council meeting to discuss this.

Sara Satullo, “Complaint forces Bethlehem cold-weather homeless shelter to ditch early opening amid frigid temps.” lehighvalleylive.com, November 15, 2019.

Bethlehem’s emergency shelter for the homeless hoped to open for the season early due to the Lehigh Valley’s deep freeze but a neighbor complaint thwarted the effort.

In 2017, the shelter at Christ Church United Church of Christ, 72. E. Market St., got zoning approval to operate from Dec. 1 to March 31 each year. On average, the church houses 65 men and women from 5 p.m. until 7 a.m. each night.

Posts on the group’s Facebook page indicate the shelter hoped to open on Friday evening as the region’s been gripped by frigid air with temperatures dropping well-below freezing at night. Overnight temperatures Friday and Saturday are set to dip to lows of 26 and 25 degrees.

But it seems a neighbor complained, forcing the shelter to adhere to the schedule approved by the Bethlehem Zoning Hearing Board.

“All of us who support BES and our mission to serve our street neighbors are deeply disappointed in the situation that forced us to delay our

opening until December 1. However, the board is requesting that people refrain from making any disparaging comments about those in the neighborhood or others who have voiced concerns about the shelter,” Bethlehem Emergency Sheltering board chair Rodney Conn said in a statement posted on the group’s Facebook page. “We have and continue to work with the community to ensure that the Shelter operations provide security to our neighbors, the Church, our volunteers, and our guests. Thank you for your cooperation.”

The nonprofit group began hosting rotating shelters for men and women at area churches in 2009. It was a realization of a dream when in December 2017 the nonprofit opened a permanent co-ed shelter in the heart of the city’s Historic District.

The shelter and the city began requiring anyone staying at the shelter to first register at the nearby police station to obtain a voucher last year in response to neighbor complaints. Police run a criminal check to ensure a person does not have outstanding warrants or is a sex offender.

The church also hired professional security guards last year and installed surveillance cameras in response to neighbor complaints.