

# Is the proposed 14-18 W. 3rd. St. project a good addition to our community? Part 1

The Bethlehem Gadfly [14-18 W. 3rd. St., Development, Southside](#) March 8, 2021

1. 🦋 Latest in a series of posts on 14-18 W. 3rd. St. 🦋

## Historic Conservation Commission meeting Monday, March 15, 2021, 6PM

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ref: **Another opportunity to apply the “Smith Principles”**

Gadfly:

Another month, another development proposal for South Bethlehem. This time we’re looking at an 8-story building proposed by local developer Joseph C. Posh for the partially-vacant triangle adjacent to Dennis Benner’s Third and New Street building. The project would require the demolition of two vacant properties, one of which most recently housed “Style You Need” printing company, which was another small Bethlehem business lost to Easton. The properties are in pretty bad shape, and the apartments have been vacant for at least five years, according to the developer. The proposed structure would include what appear to be two commercial spaces on the first floor and a fitness center for tenants, and the upper floors would include a total of 38 studio, 38 one-bedroom, and 11 two-bedroom apartments with study lounges and community rooms on each floor. While they do not specify it in their application, it appears that the project is designed to be student housing.



Spillman

3rd Street View - Point

Given the location of the project within the South Bethlehem Historic Conservation District, the project requires the approval of the Historic Conservation Commission, whose members will consider the request to

demolish two properties as well as the historic appropriateness of the proposed structure at their March 15 meeting.

Here's another test for the responsible development principles I developed a few weeks ago. Is this project a good addition to our community? I look forward to hearing your thoughts. The developer has not included a narrative describing the project, so there are significant missing pieces when we think about the overall benefit to our community.

- 1. Support projects that incorporate locally-owned businesses into their plans, and that lead to a net increase in small businesses**

The renderings of this project show two large commercial spaces on the first floor, but there is no indication yet that the developer has confirmed specific plans for these storefronts. One of the storefronts seems to include glass doors opening on to a seating area along the Greenway, which suggests that the developer may be planning for yet another restaurant or café.

The persistent vacancies at the adjacent property and the well-known difficulty of finding local business tenants for first-floor commercial properties following construction makes me wary about these storefronts. I will be looking for confirmation from the developer that there are small businesses included in the planning of these storefronts in order to ensure that they are built out to meet the needs of specific businesses. Otherwise, we may be dealing with a repeat of the neighboring structure—and adding even more vacant storefronts to the gateway to our side of town is not a great look for our community. [Research shows](#) that many residential developers prefer to keep first floor commercial properties vacant for financial reasons, so we need to keep an eye on this part of the project. On the bright side, however, this project would not displace any existing small businesses.

- 2. Prioritize development of vacant industrial properties over demolition of historic properties**

This project would require the demolition of two historic properties, but much of the building would be developed on vacant land. Both historic

properties are in pretty bad shape, so the likelihood of someone acquiring them and rehabilitating them to the point that they are truly inhabitable by residential or commercial tenants is slim. The historic properties look quaint and a bit strange along a corridor that has lost much of its historic architecture, and which is slated to lose more with the construction of the new Banana Factory/ArtsQuest complex. I am concerned about the precedent of encouraging demolition of historic properties in a historic district. But, is this a good place for development? Overall, I think this is a pretty good location for development, and I'm not too concerned with the demolition of these particular historic properties. Maybe there's a way to include elements of the historic facades in the design of the new structure. I'll look to the HCC for their thoughts on that.

**3. Encourage new development that does not exceed the size of surrounding properties and blends with historic architecture in order to create a cohesive sense of place and encourage walkability**

While coming in at 8 stories, this project is designed to be the same height as the 6-story building next door due to the difference in story-height between commercial and residential floors. I moved back to Bethlehem right as the Benner building was being approved, and I remember residents speaking out with major concerns about height. Since the project was constructed, I've heard regrets from a wide range of individuals who initially supported the project but didn't realize just quite how big and out of place the building would look. I've heard a lot of folks say that they will make sure something this size doesn't happen again in the neighborhood, since it doesn't match the surrounding historic buildings that max out around 4 stories. A proposal of the exact same size and height doesn't fit the character of our historic district. I suspect that the HCC will ask the developer to consider going a couple of floors shorter, but it may be hard for them to back up that request given their approval of the Benner building next door. I would like to see something a bit smaller.

I don't know too much about design, but I don't think the proposed design is terrible. I will rely on the HCC and other more knowledgeable

people to give more feedback on that point. The glass tower at the western end seems a bit weird to me.

#### **4. Support projects that incorporate diverse residential and commercial offerings that are accessible and affordable to South Bethlehem's population**

While the developer does not indicate proposed usage of the building, it appears that the apartments are designed to be student housing, given the study lounges on each floor. While Lehigh has indicated their intention to expand the student body significantly over the next several years, they have also committed to housing all of the additional students on campus and are actively working on several dormitory projects. Where will the 87 students come from? Will this free up housing in the neighborhoods for other renters? I'm not sure—I don't see students who live in 5-bedroom party houses being the first to sign up for a studio, so I suspect that they will draw from elsewhere. Depending on the rents, they may be able to attract some graduate students who currently live far from campus. If they offer furnished apartments, they will probably be able to attract international students. The one and two-bedroom apartments at Lehigh's new Southside Commons dorm were reserved quickly, so I expect that these will also be popular. If the developer is committed to student housing, however, there is little to no likelihood that families or non-student individuals will live there due to perception issues. This is not an affordable housing project, but it seems to be designed to serve an important part of our local population—our college students—without causing displacement of residents or quality of life issues for neighborhoods.

As far as the commercial component goes, as I mentioned above, I'm anxious to see what the developer has planned and I hope that they take the commercial component of the project seriously.

#### **5. Support adaptive reuse of historic buildings**

This is not an adaptive reuse project, and doesn't seem to have potential to be one.

*to be continued . . .*