

Exploiting the beauty of the historic district for private gain (4)

The Bethlehem Gadfly 2 W. Market St., Serious Issues October 26, 2018

(4th in a series of posts on 2 W. Market St.)

Barbara Diamond enjoys retirement as Lehigh University Director of Foundation Relations by engaging in various activities and organizations hopefully for the betterment of the community. Her particular interests at the moment are preventing gun violence, local government ethics reform, and Bethlehem Democratic Committee work.

To City Council, October 2, 2018

I am speaking as I have in the past in defense of my neighborhood but not just my neighborhood. Across the city, neighborhoods are under assault from commercial incursion – most recently by short term rentals. When you passed the STR ordinance, I heard all of you speak in support of protecting Bethlehem’s neighborhoods from the fate of so many cities that did not act in a timely way. I hope you will do so again this evening. On the agenda tonight is the request by Morning Star Partners to amend the city’s zoning ordinance so that Mr. Rij can operate his business in the historic district. What Mr. Rij seeks to do presents the same threat to our neighborhood as Mr. Brew’s Airbnbs – commercial incursion into a residential neighborhood [see the Gadfly thread on Airbnb]. When you think of “neighborhood” what comes to mind? It is a place where people live, families raise their children, where they develop friendships with neighbors and childhood memories are formed, where a sense of community within a broader community is formed. This is true whether people live in single family homes, apartments or condos. Think of your own neighborhoods. Would you like your neighbor to be a financial services business, how about an Airbnb? When homes become businesses people are deprived of those benefits of living in a neighborhood. When homes become businesses, neighboring properties are devalued, customers/transients replace neighbors, opportunities for community are reduced, homes become vacant, dark and empty and become threats to peace & security, housing stock that could become

homes is reduced, not to mention the cascade effect of people fleeing that makes it more likely that more housing will turn commercial.

What also unites these two situations is that in both cases individuals seek to exploit the beauty of the historic district for their private gain over the objections by residents and in defiance of the city's regulations and the recent Commonwealth Court decision. 2 West Market St has always been family homes and so have the Airbnbs on Market and Church Streets. There is no reason why they can't be homes for people now.

I hope that you will forcefully protect Bethlehem's neighborhoods, support the residents who do not want to see commercial slices carved out of their streets and shouldn't have to suffer the negative impacts of these operations.

Mr. Rij and Mr. Brew [see the Airbnb thread] made calculated decisions to invest in properties that they knew were not zoned for a business hoping through legal and other maneuvers to prevail. It is not the city's job to prevent their loss on investment. I also think it is important to send a message that individuals can't establish businesses in residential zones and then expect to be rezoned or grandfathered in through legal maneuvers.

I hope that you will dismiss the application to rezone 2 W Market St.

Thank you.

Barbara