

The Planning Commission couldn't find its "No"

The Bethlehem Gadfly 1st Terrace, Affordable Housing, Neighborhoods, Serious Issues, Southside
June 17, 2019

(The latest in a series of posts on the Southside and Neighborhoods)

Kevin Duffy, "South Side Bethlehem residents voice concerns over student housing." June 14, 2019.

South Side Bethlehem residents Thursday implored the city's Planning Commission to take a long, hard look at a proposal for additional student housing in their neighborhood before recommending it move ahead.

City dwellers living nearby 1st Terrace took turns voicing their displeasure over Lehigh



the site on 1st Terrace

Property Management's intention to add two four-unit town homes each numbering five bedrooms with three floors above garages to the narrow, hilltop street zoned high-density and overlooking the Asa Packer Campus of Lehigh University.

The board reviewed a sketch plan revision from one presented to them in March and opted by a 2-1 vote to advance it to the zoning board with no action for or against.

Vice Chairman Matthew Malozi, who cast the lone no vote, said he's concerned that the project might not fit within the community, and urged those in attendance to return for the zoning hearing and speak again.

"We've created a plan that conforms to all of the ordinances of the city," [the developer rep] said.

"Implored" — there's that tough verb again.

The one that indicates the gulf between the powerless and the empowered.

Some South Side Bethlehem residents Thursday **implored** the city's Planning Commission, the *Morning Call* article states, just like the May 22 South Bethlehem Historical Society letter **implored** the Mayor and City Council.

People who **implore** are, figuratively if not literally, on their knees.

They are looking for mercy (or justice).

So residents of upper Hillside Ave. and 1st Terrace **implored** the Planning Commission to take a stand against the developer sketch plan (second version) to raze four homes on 1st Terrace and build two town homes accommodating forty students.

The residents were calm but firm. In short, they said, this is an out-of-scale project involving the need for serious variances regarding steep slopes, impervious surfaces, and parking that will destabilize a highly cohesive neighborhood when the University has said there is no need for extra student housing.

This is a highly functional, mixed-income, ethnically and racially diverse neighborhood in which neighbors know each other, look out for each other, which



1st Terrace looking west

will be destabilized by this project . . . if Bethlehem city government allows all those variances to be issued for a project which is demonstrably destructive to the neighborhood, we have to ask what is the Planning Commission for . . . This is a project that simply has no place in this neighborhood. (Seth

Moglen, min. 7:55)

We have been threatened several times by the developer's maintenance persons saying that you should move, you are not going to like where you live in a couple of years . . . we should sell our houses now before the area is destabilized. I invite you all to please take a drive up to our lovely little quaint neighborhood, it's a beautiful quiet street, we've lived there a long time, we have a great neighborhood. (Gretchen Starke, min. 13:20)

Last week we were on the front porch, and Justin my 9-yr-old said, "This neighborhood is starting to suck . . . there's no kids around here any more." We can't make it go worse. We want more families to come into the neighborhood. And we have the potential to do that. . . . We want to be here, we choose to be here. My grandfather grew up in this house . . . we want to stay in this house. . . . We want to be sure we have a community and a place where we can raise kids like Justin to know all the things the Southside has to offer not just being a party town where kids come to party. (Murdock Saunders, min. 17:40)

One of the things that makes all of the Southside a cool and interesting place to live is that we have an eclectic blend of architecture, and we like it that way, it's kind of cool, but what we don't have are new things that completely depart from that old



1st Terrace looking east

look of a neighborhood . . . those are just not ways houses were designed in the old days . . . part of the interesting features of the Southside are things that blend, they might be different but they blend . . . the biggest issue is scale that does not blend. (Kim Carrell-Smith, min.

20:52)

The problem with this project is to put such density of housing on this relatively small site on a steep slope with all those cars means a malformation of the neighborhood. . . . Those would be conditions under which we would consider moving. . . . The difference between what is permitted and what is requested is so great, I don't understand how people could really consider it just a variance. . . . Consider the scale of the variance. It's not minor. (Kristen Handler, min. 27:28)

When you buy a home and put a lot of money into it, the expectation is your Planning Commission and Zoning Board keeps that stability. They don't go ahead and put a Wal-Mart behind your house. This is not Rt. 22, this is not Catasauqua Rd. . . . A project like that would be 3rd St., 4th St. (Steve Mendez, min. 31:05)

Gadfly loves the power of Bethlehem resident commentary, and he encourages you — please! — to listen to their full testimony:

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So what was the up-shot of this forceful testimony?

The purpose of the PC at this meeting was to review the developer sketch plan (2nd version) before it headed to the Zoning Board, allowing the Commission to provide any comments they would think meaningful to Zoning for the future development of the plan.

One PC member said “we heard you loud and clear,” and it was a “tough decision” — and two members of the 3-member PC recommended that the neighbors attend the Zoning Board meeting on June 26.

The PC had three options: recommend for the sketch plan, recommend against it, or take no action.

A motion to take no action passed 2-1.

“We heard you loud and clear,” but we will take no action.

Gadfly was nonplussed.

Why is it so hard to say no to a developer?

Ok, in fairness, the sketch plan had moved in a good direction in this second version, and there was no significant testimony from the developer (no rebuttal to the residents), and, the key decision on those significant variances seems to be with Zoning, and, if Zoning approves, the PC gets to vote again — ok, Gadfly gets all that . . .

But why is it so hard just to say no when that is manifestly the right decision?

Take no action. Such a wussy decision.

But at least one PC member was willing to be clear about the significant negative issues here.

At least one PC member took a stand.

Residents — mount up again on the 26th!