

The Mayor enters Southside historical district proceedings

The Bethlehem Gadfly [14-18 W. 3rd. St., 319-327 S. New](#) April 23, 2021

 *Latest posts on 14-18 W. 3rd St. and 319-327 S. New St.* 

14-18 W. 3rd St.

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

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

ref: **Is the proposed 14-18 W. 3rd. St. a good addition to our community? Part 2**

ref: **We need eyes tonight on a proposed Southside project again**

ref: **Stepping down on 3rd St.**

Damnation. Gadfly failing. He might not make it to his May 19 retirement date.

He transfixated only on the S. New St. project on the Historical Conservation Commission April 19 agenda and thus didn't attend the meeting when discussion of that project was shifted to next week.

Damnation, so he missed discussion of the demolition at the W. 3rd St. site to make way for an 8-story building, which was denied by a 3-2 vote and passed on to City Council — where there should be an interesting discussion and at which the Councilors will earn their keep.

Lately, the height has been the “elephant in the room” at these Southside projects. Gadfly's impression from the last meeting was that the Commissioners were pretty much all against the 8-story proposal and were looking for ways to revise it.

In a letter to the HCC, the Mayor argued for approval of the project.

Gadfly understands that Commissioners Lader, Starbuck, and Cornish voted to deny, Simonson and Hudak voting for.

The Mayor's finger on the scale is, at least during Gadfly's 3-year tenure, unusual. The last time he can remember the Mayor doing this was his disapproval of developer plans on First Terrace.

Gadfly would love to have heard the discussion of the Commissioners going against the Mayor or about the Mayor inserting his opinion at all. But it doesn't look like the meeting was recorded.

So, now look for major tension when this comes before City Council. The HCC only recommends. Council has the ultimate power.

selections from *“Sara K. Satullo, “2 towering urban-infill projects proposed for South Bethlehem with apartments and eclectic food court.” lehighvalleylive.com, April 22, 2021.*

Two towering urban infill, mixed-use projects are pitched for South New and West Third streets in Bethlehem, fueling a debate over how best to balance the Southside's historic features with new development.

The West Third Street project is proposed at eight stories while the South New Street one stands at 10.

This comes as the city is in the midst of a South Bethlehem Historic Conservation District study aimed at reducing heights in central business district areas from 150 feet to 90 or 60 feet on certain blocks. A 150-foot building is about 14 stories. The Wilbur Trust building, commonly known as the Flatiron building, stands at about 75 feet tall while the Fred B. Rooney Building is about 175 feet.

The South Bethlehem Historic Conservation Commission's spent the last few months reviewing certificate of appropriateness requests for both projects as developers revised plans based on board feedback. Mayor Bob Donchez recently lent his support to both projects.

The historic board voted 3-2 Monday to recommend Bethlehem City Council reject the request to demolish the existing buildings and replace them with an eight-story building at 14-18 W. Third St., said Darlene Heller, city planning director. The 317-327 S. New St. proposal was

bumped to the April 26 meeting due to the long agenda at Monday's meeting.

14-18 W. Third St.
[The Mayor's letter of support](#)

Developer Joseph C. Posh wants to tear down two structurally unstable buildings at 14-18 E. Third St. to construct an eight-story building with first floor commercial space and apartments on the upper floors, according to paperwork filed with the city. The property is adjacent to developer Dennis Benner's six-story Gateway at Greenway Park, which generated much debate when it was proposed.

The building has been vacant since 2016 when a partial wall collapse at 18 E. Third St. displaced 10 people. The wall is still shored up with wood supports.

"This is an important entry to the pedestrian Greenway and Lehigh University all by the way of the Hill-to-Hill Bridge, which is a major entry point of the South Side," Posh wrote in a letter to the board. "We feel it is important to provide a development on this critical site that is evocative to the renaissance that is occurring on the South Side while incorporating the South Side Bethlehem history."

The proposed West Third Street project offers a new anchor to "south Bethlehem's struggling western gateway area," Donchez wrote in a letter to the commission. "The West Third Street corridor is challenged with the vacant lots, the high vehicular traffic and wide intersections at Brodhead (Avenue) and a lack of pedestrian activity along this corridor."

The historic board liked the look of the building and its nods to the architecture of the neighborhood, but ultimately felt it was too high, Heller said.

319-327 S. New St.
[The Mayor's letter of support](#)

A developer has big plans for the site of Your Welcome Inn, 325 S. New St., a favorite Southside dive bar before it closed in December 2017. At the time, the team behind some of Main Street Bethlehem's most popular restaurants —Juan and Cara Paredes and Rafael Palomino — planned a pub. The trio own numerous eateries including Tapas on Main, the Flying Egg, Cachette Bistro & Creperie.

Now, Palomino has grander plans for 317-327 S. New Street, where 325 South New Street Development LLC is pitching a 10-story building of 65 market-rate apartments and affordable housing, anchored by an eclectic food court, according to documents filed with the city. The building incorporates the Italianate Facade of 321-323 S. New St., the only building deemed historic, and the building adds square footage as it rises back to East Graham Place.

The ground floor would be leased to Palomino Food Court incorporating Tapas, Mesa, Humble Garden (vegan food), Burger (American food), and Piccolo offering Italian.

The first three stories of the building are designed to match the style of the historic district and building materials used. It features a rooftop patio and a gym as building amenities.

“I believe there are many exciting qualities in the project,” Donchez wrote in his letter of support. “These aspects include the redevelopment of underutilized structures, an exciting complement of food and restaurant amenities, much needed market rate and affordable housing, and an architecturally appropriate project for the Southside Historic Conservation District.”

The food court meets the high demand for limited service restaurants found in a 2019 retail market analysis of the Southside. But the most important aspect for Donchez is the commitment to make 10% of the project affordable housing. Housing costs for qualified residents, based on federal guidelines, would be limited to less than 30% of household income.

“The importance of the willingness of this owner to commit to affordable housing cannot be understated, as this is the first project of its kind to

commit to addressing this important issue without financial incentive specific to the creation of affordable housing,” Donchez writes.

There’s also significant demand for market-rate apartments in the arts district with a tight 3.5% residential rental vacancy rate, the mayor states.

“This high demand for new units will meet the demands of health care providers, young professionals and graduate students, and concentrating them in the downtown has been the goal of my administration,” he said.

The mayor believes the project design aligns with the historic district’s design guidelines and he notes the developer has reduced the building height from 150 feet to 100 feet. While the study of the historic district does propose limiting heights in this area to 90 feet, the mayor says the extra height is a necessary tradeoff to make 10% of the units affordable housing.

The historic board thus far has objected to the height of the proposed project, but liked the look of the exterior, Heller said.