

Reflections on Southside Bethlehem, Part 4: The Specter of Student Housing

The Bethlehem Gadfly Affordable Housing, Neighborhoods, Serious Issues, Southside June 14, 2019

(Fourth in a 5-part series of posts on the Southside by Anna Smith)

Anna Smith is a life-long Southside resident and Director of the Community Action Development Corporation of Bethlehem, a non-profit dedicated to improving the quality of life in south Bethlehem by fostering economic opportunity, promoting community development, and empowering residents to actively participate in the decision-making process regarding the future of our diverse community.

Gadfly:

Campus-community tensions are an inevitable component of any college town. South Bethlehem and Lehigh are no exception to the rule (if you can find an exception *anywhere*, I'd love to hear about it!). Once again, your perspective depends on your location (in this case, physical location matters), and your frame of reference. Here are a few of the things I'm thinking about these days.

Going back at least a decade, the expansion in off-campus housing for Lehigh University students drastically changed the face of Fifth Street, Hillside Ave, Birkel Avenue, and Montclair Avenue. Once home to families and homeowners, portions of these streets are now almost exclusively student housing. This transition was painful for the remaining homeowners who feel that the community where they bought their homes has disappeared. They can probably sell their homes for

more money now, but the emotional component of losing a neighborhood has to be recognized, and we can't deny that the look and feel of a community has value for those that call it home. Backyards once home to meticulously tended rose gardens have been converted to parking lots. Remnants of student parties are piled high on trash day, and old couches continue to appear on front porch littered with beer bottles. Neighbors who have witnessed the transition from Bethlehem Steel retirees to students are entitled to their frustration. Not all students are bad neighbors, but that's not the point.

Like development, however, the student housing expansion did not occur in a vacuum. Without student housing, what would have happened to these properties? Overall economic trends in south Bethlehem and similar deindustrializing communities would suggest that many of these properties would not have been purchased by homeowners following the relocation of their original owners. The neighborhood would have experienced change with or without students—what that change would have looked like is difficult to say, and value judgments are beyond the scope of this discussion. However, the lack of a resident voice—the lack of choices—in what happened to these neighborhoods was enough to create a sense of impotence among those left behind. That frustration can be difficult to understand for those focused solely on the economics of the situation, but taking some time to listen to the stories of our neighbors brings the aches and pains of neighborhood change into view.

For those living on the outskirts of the student neighborhoods, the student housing discussion is quite different. Give them Birkel and Fifth, my former neighbors on Carlton plead; just don't let them take over my neighborhood. The students are generally fine people, but they just have different hours and lifestyles that don't mesh well with raising a toddler. Doesn't it make more sense to concentrate the students close to one another and to campus? What family wants to live across the street from a student dorm, anyway? The conversion of single-family homes to student housing feels threatening to residents on the outskirts of

predominantly student neighborhoods who are watching their blocks change more rapidly than they ever had before. What will they do if they are the last homeowners on the only block they have known for the last 50 years?

Anna