

# Establishing community-centered principles for responsible Southside development

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 *Latest in a series of posts on new development* 

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Gadfly:

The February 22<sup>nd</sup> Historic Conservation Commission meeting was a win for proponents of responsible development, but I worry that the phrase is most frequently used in discussions of what we would NOT like to see occur in our neighborhoods. The process by which development projects are proposed, reviewed, and approved in our city—which is not unique to our community but represents standard operating procedure for most cities like ours—does not make much space for proactive discussions of community-centered development. No one wants to say “no” all the time, so let’s talk about what responsible Southside development could look like. There are great examples of creative projects that got each of these principles right and that can guide us as we envision the future of our community.

## **Establishing Community-Centered Principles for Responsible Southside Development** **Anna Smith**

The City of Bethlehem has seen a remarkable number of development projects proposed for its downtowns over the last several years, from mixed-use retail, restaurants, and housing to office space and luxury apartments. Some projects have been in the works for decades, carefully strategized with every detail scrutinized by developers and their partners, while others seem to have been thrown together at the last minute by novice teams of folks new to the Lehigh Valley. Regardless of how they come together, each project undergoes a similar evaluation process that includes review by City officials, the City’s Planning Commission, and often an historic and architectural review or an appeal to the Zoning Hearing Board. Every board or commission has a narrow

scope to consider, and although some occasionally overstep their boundaries, no group is charged with actively working to ensure that each project is a productive addition to a long-term vision for a viable community. Residents and small-business owners often attend these meetings to express their views, but the technical aspects under consideration can be intimidating to folks unfamiliar with the City's ordinances, and many committee members are professionals with a background in development themselves who are capable of quickly checking the appropriate boxes regarding stormwater, architectural design, and sidewalk grading. Throughout these review processes, many of the components of projects that are most important to those who live or work nearby receive only minor consideration.

Let's take a moment to think about what our approval processes would look like if they truly centered impact on the quality of life residents and small businesses in our community. What if we had a resident- and small business-centered framework to evaluate each development proposal that comes in front of our City government? After all, our residents and small businesses are the foundation of our community, and our City government exists primarily to serve the interests of these constituents. We are the voters and taxpayers; we are the ones who live, work, and play in the neighborhoods and downtowns, and our interests should play an important role in thinking through the costs and benefits of any new development project proposed for our community. And those interests extend beyond the technical aspects of projects outlined in the City's ordinances. What would that framework look like? Here's my first try at a list of principles for responsible development on the Southside with some examples of recent-ish projects that I think have successfully embodied each approach. What would you add or change?

1. Support projects that incorporate locally-owned businesses into their plans, and that lead to a net increase in small businesses. Examples: Riverport Market, Flatiron Flats
2. Prioritize development of vacant industrial properties over demolition of historic properties. Examples: The Factory, 510 Flats
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. Examples: Polk Street building

4. Support projects that incorporate diverse residential and commercial offerings that are accessible and affordable to South Bethlehem's population. Examples: proposed Palace Row redevelopment
5. Support adaptive reuse of historic buildings. Examples: Brinker Lofts, Flatiron Flats, Grace Mansion (in progress), Goodman building (proposed), Wilbur Mansion project (in progress)
6. Support projects that incorporate green space and/or the development of public spaces into their design. Examples: Brinker Lofts opening onto the Greenway
7. Support projects that are developed in response to community needs identified by residents and stakeholders, and that engage residents and stakeholders in idea development and the design process
8. Support projects that prioritize sustainable development practices and take proactive approaches to addressing challenges presented by our changing climate. Examples: The Flatiron Building
9. Avoid projects that cause displacement of long-time residents, low-income residents, and locally-owned businesses
10. Do not use projects that are nearly universally considered planning and design failures as precedent for elements of new development (e.g., Urban Renewal projects like Rooney building, Litzenberger House, Lehigh's Brodhead House, Rite Aid shopping center.

*to be continued . . .*