

Historical preservation pays, part 1

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 *Latest in a series of posts on new development* 

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Thanks for covering so many issues about new development in our city, Gadfly. As so many residents, city officials, and business folks have noted, new development can be good for the city and is necessary for our tax base. But a few of us have added a caveat: there is a difference between “anything goes” and thoughtful planning and development. The future of our city should be based on sound practice that considers the latest data and research.

Is there a sound alternative development vision to the excessive massing and height or the occasional glitzy glass and metal facades that seem typical of new project proposals that have been announced for our downtowns lately, in Bethlehem? As the [*Infill Development Standards and Policy Guide*](#) (developed for the state of NJ by the Rutgers Center for Urban Policy Research and the University of MD's National Center for Smart Growth and Education) has noted, successful infill projects in cities should be “context-sensitive.”

The context in Bethlehem's two downtowns is HISTORICAL. Bethlehem led a national urban movement when the city chose to protect, preserve, and enhance historical streetscapes *as an economic strategy* over thirty years ago. That choice changed the fate of an endangered Northside downtown (which was struggling in the face of suburban mall and shopping center developments) into a vibrant, bustling place filled with a mix of housing and small businesses for both tourists and local folks. What attracted them? The historical ambience created by the original scale and massing of the downtown streetscape and the historical

architecture of its buildings, as well as the unique small businesses and restaurants on the street level, with apartments above.

A similar renaissance happened in the 1990s as the city embraced the historical streetscape of the Southside business district while assisting new small businesses to establish themselves on Third and Fourth Streets and encouraging the Banana Factory redevelopment, all of which helped to define the Southside's niche as an historical and artsy side of town. The preservation of significant buildings on the Bethlehem Steel site also emphasized the historical, gritty past of this area, and drew visitors to this side of town. Although totally different thematically, our two downtowns' eclectic historical architecture and the complementary height and scale of the building stock in the main business districts created an appealing, warm, welcoming vibe and aesthetic in both places. As one small business owner on the Northside said in a 2016 *Morning Call* article about the city's embrace of historical ambience and livable scale, "I think a lot of places try to re-create it. But they can't. They don't have what we have." And so far we have a strong presence of historical building stock, compelling historical vistas and views, as well as historical tales to tell from our colonial past to twentieth century industrial history, which combine to make Bethlehem's commercial corridors a draw for visitors and residents. Of course business cultivation and promotion is essential, and like all downtowns we've faced recessions and other setbacks, and small businesses struggle as they do everywhere, but we have the foundational elements for economic success in our unique setting and historical branding.

So, could preserving the historical ambience and human scale of our city — while allowing for strategically integrated, thoughtfully guided development and redevelopment projects that honor our city's "history" branding— foster increased economic success like tax money, jobs, feet on the street, new businesses, tourists, and increased property values in Bethlehem? The answer is a resounding yes, and there is plenty of *evidence* from the experience of other cities and regions to support that claim.

If you can hang on for the ride, I'd like to introduce you to actual evidence, not just baseless claims about whether intentional planning for, and preservation of historical streetscapes and livable scale in a city

pays off, starting with one hyperlink connecting to numerous studies that explore the economic impacts of historic preservation. In a future post I promise to discuss the highlights of two studies that are particularly applicable to the current development climate in Bethlehem.

I provide the link to myriad studies here first because it might be fun to skim but also to demonstrate that there are so very MANY legitimate, well-designed studies on this subject! The information in these studies is based on solid data and good research done by professional planners, data and policy analysts, and academics (urban planners, business professors, economists), and lawyers, most of whom belonged to two different top teams of consultants: one firm is the highly regarded real estate and economic development firm PlaceEconomics, and the other consulting group is the equally well known Center for Urban Policy Research, at Rutgers.

Here is the hyperlinked list of studies from 28 states, 12 cities, and a few National Heritage Areas (like our D&L) that all examined the impact of historic preservation on the local economy. The vast majority of these studies indicate that maintaining the historical integrity of cities can and does enhance property values, creates jobs, expands the tax base, attracts visitors and/or new residents, and puts “feet on the street.” In fact, each city, state, or regional study provides strong evidence for such assertions.

So there IS an alternative way of thinking about “progress”! I promise fewer studies, but fascinating findings, in the next installment . . .

Kim

First in a series . . .