

Smith puts eyes on the plan for 3rd and Polk

The Bethlehem Gadfly 404 E. 3rd St., Development April 8, 2021

 *Latest in a series of posts on 404 E. 3rd St.* 

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**404 E. 3rd St.
Planning Commission
Thursday, April 8, 5PM**

**<https://global.gotomeeting.com/join/184879645>
1(872)240-3212
access code 184-879-645**

ref: **Establishing community-centered principles [the Smith principles] for responsible Southside development**

Gadfly:

Here we go again! The latest proposal for Southside Bethlehem is up for approval, and since it lies outside the Historic Conservation District, residents and business owners only have one chance to weigh in on the project—the upcoming Planning Commission meeting on Thursday, April 8 at 5 pm. Based on my experience with the current Planning Commission, I have little hope for any discussion that extends beyond minute technical details and congratulatory remarks to the developer, and a swift approval of everything as designed and presented. But, hey, we could be surprised. Regardless, I encourage folks to attend to remind our Planning Commission that residents and small business owners are interested in weighing in on proposed projects, which they are charged with ensuring represent “the best possible development” for our community.

The project under consideration is a 7-story (85 ft) mixed-use building proposed for the corner of Third and Polk streets in south Bethlehem, to be developed

by Lou Pektor's Ashley Development Corporation (owners of the mixed-use building across Polk Street). The current site is a parking lot



that was previously slated for development as a [two-story building with a major restaurant tenant](#), which went through a few different iterations over the years. Times have changed, and post-COVID, [Lehigh Valley-housing-crisis](#) projects are flooding in, as are [proposals hoping to sneak in before height limits are changed for the Southside commercial districts](#). The new project consists of two floors designed for commercial use, with two retail spaces on the first floor, a large commercial space on the second floor (medical office? gym?), and then five floors that will include 25 studio apartments, 35 1-BR apartments, and 20 2-BR apartments. While they have not specified it, I believe that the apartments are likely going to be targeted as college student housing, given their size, location, and the developer's recent conversion of their adjacent property to student apartments.

- 1. Support projects that incorporate locally owned businesses into their plans, and that lead to a net increase in small businesses.**

Here's a big question for the developers, and one that I hope is addressed at the Planning Commission. Based on Ashley Development's track record at their adjacent Third Street property, I'm nervous about the first-floor retail spaces. To their credit, after years of persistent vacancies, they have finally filled the huge holes in their first floor (and upper floors, for that matter, which were vacant for years following the

departure of St. Luke's). However, having worked with small businesses that were interested in locating in the property, I know that the developer was willing to sit on vacant properties for years rather than lower prices to attract a small, local business—a trend that is all too common (and unfortunately, makes financial sense). The types of businesses that can afford a large, unfinished storefront are few and far between.

So, the questions we need answered here: Are the developers working with specific local businesses on this project? How will they ensure that the first and second floor spaces meet the needs of actual businesses in our community and remain filled?

2. Prioritize development of vacant industrial properties over demolition of historic properties.

This seems like an apt location for new development. Parking lots don't add much to the neighborhood, and extending the commercial corridor along Third Street has been a goal of the City's for a long time. No historic properties will be harmed in the construction of this building, so that's always a plus!

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.

This is an interesting one. Once you get to Polk Street, Third Street becomes an eclectic mix of sizes and styles, particularly considering proposed structures for the many parking lots of the redevelopment area. There is no master plan for design for this area (that I'm aware of) to encourage developers to build in any consistent way. Here's where something like a [form-based master plan](#) could have been helpful. But it's too late for that, so let's look at what we have in front of us.

Personally, I think the building is pretty ugly. The dark, set back retail spaces under the massive overhang of several stories of apartments do not look inviting. Ashley Development's other project on Third Street made an effort to blend in with the surrounding neighborhood, probably because it was required to as part of the historic review process. But the

Historic Conservation District ends at Polk Street (along Third Street), so I suppose they are going for a cheap look rather than one that blends with their next-door neighbor. What do you think?

When it comes to building height, most folks on the Southside seem to agree that this end of town is best suited for large buildings given the tall historic structures that already characterize the area. The project requires a significant number of variances due to the proposed density on such a small site, but the location within the industrial redevelopment area means that it will be easier to get these and that this site in particular would not be affected by proposed height reductions throughout the rest of the business district. At 85 feet, the building will be taller than most of the surrounding properties (existing and proposed), although the developers indicate that it will be similar to the Northampton Community College building.

I'm not thrilled about the building's appearance and don't think it fits very well into the surrounding area. But I want to hear the thoughts of other residents and business owners.

4. Support projects that incorporate diverse residential and commercial offerings that are accessible and affordable to South Bethlehem's population.

This project will offer a range of studio, one-, and two-bedroom apartments. I hope that the developer will indicate if these are intended to serve college students or another population. Given the small size of the units and the likely price range, I don't see much of a market for these studios beyond students. A range of apartments in these sizes is needed in our community, but it is highly unlikely given construction costs that the developer will charge prices that would actually meet the affordable housing needs of our community. I look forward to hearing more about this point.

5. Support adaptive reuse of historic buildings.

This is not an adaptive reuse project and doesn't seem to have potential to be one.

6. Support projects that incorporate green space and/or the development of public spaces into their design.

This project proposes covering 95+% of the lot with impervious surfaces and removing 17 12-foot sycamores from the property, so green space looks to be a net loss (not that there was much to begin with). The second-floor commercial space and residential entrances will be located on the Mechanic Street-side of the building, so at least the view from the Greenway will be more than just dumpsters. Not much else to say here.

- 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.**

There's no indication that residents and community stakeholders were consulted in the development of this project. I know it's not the norm, but I will continue to insist that the best projects require community input.

- 8. Support projects that prioritize sustainable development practices and take proactive approaches to addressing challenges presented by our changing climate.**

Thus far, this project does not address this point. I hope that the developer's presentation will include an analysis of the environmental impact of the project.

- 9. Avoid projects that cause displacement of long-time residents, low-income residents, and locally owned businesses**

No businesses or residents will be displaced through this project, so that is definitely a plus.

- 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)**

This doesn't seem to be an issue in this particular case.

All in all, I'm not extremely excited about this proposal. I'm interested in learning more. I agree that this is an appropriate location to direct development, but I wish it were more attractive, and I hope the storefronts will be filled immediately with small, local businesses that serve Southside residents. I'm interested in hearing if this will be student housing. I'm also curious to see if the project will actually move forward, since the developer has been sitting on the property for years.

I hope that the Planning Commission will take the final point on the City's letter seriously and condition approval on obtaining contracts for parking spaces at the specified Parking Authority lots. Given the explosion in development proposals on the Southside, it will be a race for developers to acquire a finite number of spots. I believe other developers have cited some of these same parking spots in their calculations, so we will need to keep an eye on approvals to ensure that spaces are not double-counted.

You may have noticed that my analysis is less robust than usual. This is a factor of time; as a community, we were made aware of this project on April 5 thanks to a Morning Call article. The actual plans weren't published on the City's website until late in the day on April 5, leaving the community three days to analyze the proposals in preparation for the only opportunity to provide input in a formal setting. I'm staying up far later than I would like to finish this analysis so that it can be published by The Gadfly and hopefully encourage a few folks to come out to the Planning Commission meeting. Do you see the problem here? I hope so. Responsible and community-oriented development requires doing a lot better.

Anna