

Reflections on Southside Bethlehem, Part 1: Economic and Community Development

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

(First 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.

Neighborhoods change. And they have always changed. There's no question that change continues in south Bethlehem, and, value judgments aside, most folks living in the City will agree that change is happening faster these days.

Recently, a colleague asked me what data points I track to measure economic development over time in south Bethlehem. Number of apartments? Rental prices? Number of employees? Commercial vacancies? Median sale prices of single-family homes? New investment dollars?

In the world of government and big business (under a neoliberal system), change tends to be measured in investment dollars, new construction, jobs created, businesses opened—the bigger the numbers, the better.

In my experience, however, when you ask neighbors what they think about their neighborhoods, they never cite these numbers to describe

change. Changes in quality of life are measured in terms of friendly neighbors who stay put, trash on the street, dogs barking, leaving doors unlocked, walking to work or school, parks and green space, street lighting, police activity, graffiti, and safe places for children to play.

I think a lot about what quality of life means for our community as the director of an organization tasked with expanding economic opportunity and promoting community development in south Bethlehem. How do we identify quantitative and qualitative measures of “progress” that resonate at all levels with diverse stakeholders—local government, corporate funders, neighborhood organizations?

The indicators we track and how we interpret them shed light on our values, our priorities, and our goals as a community, and they will inevitably vary depending on the angle from which we are examining south Bethlehem. I don’t expect us all to agree—sharing different perspectives, debating their merits, and coming to collective decisions is what participatory democracy is all about.

From my perspective as both a lifelong resident of south Bethlehem and as the leader of an organization tasked with improving the quality of life in our neighborhoods, here are some of the things I’m thinking about as we debate neighborhood change and its winners and losers.

Anna