

Southsider Smith counsels the City to “take some time to examine the data and develop a sustainable solution”

The Bethlehem Gadfly Southside May 12, 2021

 *The latest in a series of posts on the Southside* 

Continuing coverage of last night’s important Community Development Committee meeting on Southside Historic District regulation. Anna Smith is no stranger to Gadfly followers. Here are her comments at the meeting. More details to come.

Good evening, this is Anna Smith, homeowner at 631 Ridge St, born and raised on the Southside.

This work was born from the important recognition among members of the administration that inconsistencies between the zoning code and the historic conservation guidelines in the Southside Historic Conservation District create inefficiencies in the project development process and unclear instructions to prospective developers. Throughout this study process, building height has emerged as the primary issue to be addressed.

I’d like to address building height from a community planning perspective, and share why I think that regulating building height is such an important piece of our community’s future viability—and I do agree that it is in all of our best interest to lower the overall heights in the zoning code, although I have some concerns about the process of this study.

When we talk about allowable building heights, we’re really talking about what kind of density we want to see in our downtown. The higher we build, the more people we can house on a single parcel (since residential is now the exclusive new building terrain in a post-COVID world). I love the Southside because it is densely populated, making it a vibrant, walkable community where there are always folks out on the street.

However, population density is a tricky thing, and most people would agree that it's something that we need to balance—particularly in a community which is so car-dependent (87% of Southside residents work outside of Southside Bethlehem). There's an ideal density that can be supported by a community's infrastructure before density begins to cause problems—traffic, parking, pollution, social alienation/loss of “small town” feel. The Southside is the most densely populated area of the City, with a population-density in our residential and commercial neighborhoods (excluding the Lehigh campus and industrial redevelopment areas) of 13,175 people per square mile, comparable to the population density of Boston. If this were considered a city of its own, we would be the 52nd most densely-populated city in the US.

But the development pressure on our community is greater than ever, and the projects that would increase density in our downtown keep coming. Since 2014, 12 different developers have proposed 15 projects to add 652 new apartments to the Southside in our downtown areas. Of those, 464 units are not yet occupied (but many will soon be, as they are under construction). Assuming that those apartments (a majority of which will be 2 bedroom) house just an additional 750 people, our downtown and residential neighborhood population density will increase to 13,856 people per square mile—passing Boston, Elmwood Park in Chicago and Daly City in San Francisco. If we use the city's current, accepted ratio of cars to apartments (1.1 vehicles per unit), we are looking at 510 more cars parking in our downtowns, daily. All of this is development that is either approved or is on its way to approval and would not be impacted by these changes. If we remove checks on building height at the HCC level, how many more high-rise projects will we see on the Southside? When will our community be “dense” enough? Traffic is already so bad on the Southside that I've changed my shopping destinations on weekdays, and now rarely shop for groceries or head to a pharmacy in the city, since it takes me so long to get across town. Once we pass Boston—which we surely will with the construction already planned for our neighborhood—we only have 2 major cities left that are denser: San Francisco and New York City. Is that where we are headed?

As I'm sure you agree, the HCC is not the commission that should be responsible for developing or enforcing a sustainable development plan for the Southside, but at the moment, they are the ONLY group that

Southsiders can go to to express concerns about out of control development that threatens the qualities that make the Southside a desirable place to live. The HCC is the only place where we have a chance to be heard by individuals who live or own businesses in our neighborhoods, and who actually get it when we talk about the impact of a project on our day-to-day lives. If you remove the one check that we have on out of control development *without a plan in place to promote sustainable development*, then you risk making the Southside an unlivable, overbuilt, economic development engine for the rest of the city. Once again, this would suggest that quality-of-life concerns are only important if they happen on the Northside—not in the Southside’s “neighborhoods of no consequence,” as a developer recently referred to them in a Planning Commission meeting as he pitched his student housing tower.

I’m urging you to take a step back, and examine the actual data on development in South Bethlehem. This study asserts a need for new construction in south Bethlehem’s commercial core without providing any data other than opinions to support where and how it can be added to grow our community responsibly. We need a comprehensive planning effort that considers quality of life—not just tax revenue. We need to end the current extractive relationship between the two sides of town, where gentrification and displacement of Southside residents and businesses are justified through additional tax revenue to provide services that benefit the residents whose lives are untouched on the Northside.

I’m going to put on my economist hat for a moment (since I happen to have a degree in economics) and ask that you please remember one of the basic regulatory function of government in a market economy: to ensure that public goods—which are often underprovided in the free market—can be provided at the optimal level to everyone. In this case, quality of life in our neighborhoods without traffic congestion, parking problems, and pollution, and with walkable downtowns with ample green space, are public goods. There’s no incentive for developers to worry about these things. If we give them free reign to develop, then that’s what they’ll do. It’s your job to figure out how to regulate development to ensure an optimal outcome for our residents. So please listen to us tonight, and let’s take some time to examine the data and develop a sustainable solution that reflects an understanding of the

complex role of building height in community planning. This is not just about old buildings vs. new, this is about the future livability of our neighborhoods—and it deserves a much deeper analysis.