

“don’t let more families like us leave,” says former Southside resident

The Bethlehem Gadfly Southside October 24, 2020

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

Gadfly will be providing more detail on the meeting. But when, Gadfly, when?

Selections from Christina Tatu, “Bethlehem considering ordinance that would limit student housing for the sake of neighborhoods.” Morning Call, October 23, 2020.

South Side residents are urging Bethlehem City Council to swiftly approve a zoning amendment regulating off-campus student housing, saying families are being driven out and real estate prices are being driven up by developers snatching up properties to house college students.

City Council held a special meeting Thursday to hear public comments on the proposal, which was unanimously approved by the Planning Commission in August. It provides a student housing district that city officials said would protect neighborhoods and **keep students** to more appropriate areas.

City officials have been working for several years with South Side community organizations, property owners and landlords to prepare the amendment. The district would be on the northeast and northwest sides of Lehigh University’s campus, bordered on the west side by Eighth Street to the south, Hess Street to the west and Cress Street to the north; and on the east side by Thomas Street to the south, Pierce Street to the east and East Morton Street to the north.

The new zoning would limit housing to five students per residence in those districts, while three students per residence would be allowed in the central commercial and limited commercial districts to the north of campus. Outside of these areas, city officials are recommending only two college students be allowed in a dwelling unit.

Landlords who already operate student housing outside of those districts could continue to do so as long as they maintain their annual licenses with the city, said Darlene Heller, the planning director.

Anna Smith, a former director for the Community Action Development Corp. of the Lehigh Valley and the owner of a home on Ridge Street, said that in 2018, property sales were up 34% near Lehigh's campus and prices went up 18%. But the percentage of new owner-occupied homes was low.

"We heard stories from neighborhoods that had previously housed only a handful of students, but where out-of-state buyers were going door-to-door hoping to buy entire lots of homes to demolish and build luxury student townhomes," she said. "Since 2018, we have seen prices continue to rise with single-family homes now selling for upwards of \$300,000 or more to prospective student housing buyers, who will rent them out at up to \$1,000 per bedroom."

Although student housing has been a part of the community for a long time, events over the last couple years have shifted the balance and left longtime residents concerned about losing their family-oriented neighborhood, Smith said.

Murdoch Saunders said he sold his Hillside Avenue home in the South Side last month. It was the only home his sons, ages 6 and 10, knew. He decided to leave after several students moved in across the street and the house next door was turned into student housing.

"My kids still miss their home," he said. "As someone who still loves the city of Bethlehem, we still come back. ... But don't let more families like us leave. We want to be there and if there was a house in the right community in south Bethlehem, we would be back there next month."

Speaking against the ordinance, James Byszewski, of Fifth Street Properties, said he doesn't think it's fair that it targets students. He also believes it would also be difficult to enforce.

"By limiting it to students, you open yourself up to a list of challenges when it comes to fair housing," he said.

