

“The current proposal for a 12-story structure is inappropriate”

The Bethlehem Gadfly 319-327 S. New, Development, Southside February 21, 2021

🌀 Latest in a series of posts on 319-327 S. New St. 🌀

video

***Historic Conservation Commission meeting January 25
mins. 46:40-1:43:52***

“The current proposal for a 12-story structure is inappropriate for the immediate streetscape and, more generally, for the overall historic conservation district.”

Jeff Long, HCC Historic Officer

ref: **Another developer thinking big . . . er, tall**

ref: **The HCC discusses the proposal for 319-327 S. New**

The discussion at HCC on the proposed 12-story mixed-use building on the east side of the 300 block of New St. during their January 25 meeting took about an hour.

Let’s break the lengthy meeting down into parts in order to more easily grasp what went on.



Per usual practice, HCC Historic Officer Jeff Long sets the table for the discussion between the Commissioners and the developers (**mins. 49:30-1:09:20**):



- **Min. 49:30**: Long describes each existing building to be demolished in physical detail and historical context. The buildings date from the period 1880s-1900. For the most part original architectural facade features have been lost in alterations and renovations over the years, so several of the buildings now lack a defining architectural style.
- **Min. 56:20**: Long lists each of the guidelines used to render his judgment about the appropriateness of the proposal. This is an official “historic district,” and it is governed by a set of national and local guidelines.
- **Min. 58:04**: Long summarizes the developer’s proposal. A report submitted by the developer justifies demolition on the poor condition of the buildings.
- **Min. 59:40**: Long identifies the 3 components of his evaluation/analysis: the demolition, the size and scale, the facade construction itself.
 - **Min. 1:00:20** demolition: Long’s judgment is that buildings 319, 325, and 327 warrant destruction, but the building that houses 321 and 323 does not.
 - **Min. 1:04:04** size and scale and proportion: Long concludes, “The current proposal for a 12-story structure is inappropriate for the immediate streetscape and, more generally, for the overall historic conservation district.” He uses what I will call the 4-story “Subway” building to the south of the site as the point of reference to say that the proposed 12-story building is out of scale with its surroundings.
- **Min. 1:06:58** other guidelines: Long finds some positive elements here and makes suggestions for some other elements

and resources to be further considered. There are things that the developer does well in aligning the facade with its neighborhood and historical context.

Ok, where do things stand after Jeff Long “set the table”?

As Gadfly sees it (and he’s ready for correction), Long’s role is to be objective. He stops short of a judgment on the entire project. He does not render an up or down.

In Gadfly’s experience going to HCC meetings, the Commissioners can choose to follow him or not, just as City Council in a future step in the process can choose to follow the HCC judgment or not. Council has the last word. And they have rejected HCC rejections in well known “hot” cases.

But let’s think about where we are at this point in the meeting.

- Long’s split decision on demolition seems very awkward. What is the developer to do with his plan or any plan if it has to work around keeping a structure right in the middle of his site?
- The height of buildings in the Historic District here has been a particular sore point in the past. Witness approval for a tall building at 4th and Vine that has not been acted on yet. Witness the “Zest” building at 306 S.New. Long is categorical in saying the height is not appropriate. But there are tall, though not as tall as the proposed building, buildings across the street.
- In talking about his last point, Long seems to be giving positive advice if the proposed height is approved or for a revised proposal for a shorter building if not.

The Commissioners must consider what Long has laid out, but experience would show that they are not bound to it.

Which has not set well in many quarters in the past.

Gadfly can remember a City Council meeting in which Councilwoman Negrón bitterly decried the lack of attention to rules and guidelines.

And look at how follower Peter Crownfield responded to Gadfly's previous post: "It is the HCC's responsibility to enforce the historic district guidelines. This building does not fit the guidelines, so the developer should simply be told to come back with a proposal that does. The HCC is making itself completely irrelevant if it spends its time on the details of signs while ignoring glaring non-compliance with the guidelines."

So, should a developer who proposes a 12-story building in an area predominately made up of 2-3-4-story buildings simply be told straight out that it won't fly?

Let's go on in the next post to see how the discussion went.

The Bethlehem Gadfly