

On the Southside, size matters

The Bethlehem Gadfly Southside April 3, 2021

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

Gadfly hates himself for that title.

One reason he's retiring.

Starting to cater to the prurient interest of his followers.

But there is, he must say, powerful concern about size of construction on the Southside.

The City, bless 'em, is trying to bring zoning ordinances more in line with the historic conservation district ordinances.

For instance, zoning now permits buildings in the Southside CB district (see map) 150ft. high, perhaps 14 stories, whereas, as we have seen abundantly even very recently, the historic guidelines and the HCC Commission are counseling 2-5 stories.

For a good point of reference, the Zest/Benner building at 3rd and New (306 S. New) is 88ft. high, 6 stories, and the Flatiron building is 75ft.

This draft plan proposes dropping the 150ft height allowance in the CB district to 90ft (6-8 stories, cf. the Zest/Benner building) in the section you see carved out by the dotted lines and to 60ft (4-5 stories) in the rest of the district. In addition, the draft plan proposes a "step back" of the top floor in the taller buildings.



Listen to the consultant outline the proposed zoning changes:

Audio Player not available in this archive

Though one developer spoke in favor of keeping the taller height and one resident made a strong case for doing so to create affordable housing, over a dozen residents spoke strongly against the proposed 90ft height allowance in the part of the CB district. Seth Moglen, for instance, spoke for Gadfly when he found the proposed 90ft height allowances “mystifying” from his sense of public opinion on the topic.

This was another one of Gadfly’s favorite occasions — the public spoke fairly and forthrightly against the 90ft part of the proposal, and the meeting ended with a promise that the city and the consultant would revisit the proposal on the basis of what they heard and that there would be further and with hope fuller dialog in the future.

“The latest edition of Southern Exposure which shows what South Bethlehem would look like with all these huge bigger buildings scares me.” (Roger Hudak)

“I really worry about the building heights . . . The more we develop South Bethlehem, the more we lose our little pockets of green space . . . I worry about putting up tall buildings by the really few green spaces that we have left.” (Rachel Leon)

“I would have thought if you interviewed people who live on the Southside, almost everybody would say 90ft is too tall.” (Seth Moglen)

“I wanted to ask about the eastern side of New St. It struck me as strange that that area was included in the 90ft height . . . was that cutout made specifically for the current proposal there?” (Anna Smith)

“It’s almost universal that everybody regrets [the Zest/Benner building] . . . 90ft is too much . . . environmental issues . . . cavern effect . . . will remove the character, the charm, the ambience. (Dana Grubb)

“The 90ft is really too big . . . vista down to the steelworks, an amazing gateway to Bethlehem, a remarkable way to experience the Southside as you come across that bridge, I would really hate to see a bunch of tall buildings thrown up in front of that vista.” (Kim Carrell-Smith)

“When looking at the 90ft proposal zone, it is directly in front of the two bridges that are coming in to the Southside, and so . . . you are going to enter in to a small city that is full of very generic looking tall buildings that hide all the beauty of all of the older, lower-rise buildings. (Joe Lule)

“I’d like to see the role of the Conservation Commission be stronger.”
(Anne Evans)

“If you put 90ft across from [Lehigh Pizza and the Banana Factory], you will be in a huge shadow.” (Beth Starbuck)

“Would it not be more feasible and more appropriate to lower the height [to work with developers on density bonuses for affordable housing].”
Grace Crampsie Smith

” I worry if you have a 60ft height limit stacked up along the Greenway right where those parking lots are, which presumably could happen if the city sold those lots, it would really diminish the quality of the Greenway.
(Breena Holland)

“Approve one, it sets a precedent for others. If we let one builder do 90ft, well, then, the next builder is going to want to do the same. My other concern is the amount of additional traffic . . . going to take away the small town feel that Bethlehem is kinda noted for.” (Lou James)

“I really champion your cause for lowering the height of those buildings . . . you have an asset over there, and your architecture is part of it, and I think your future is in the smaller building area.” (Bruce Haines)