

Council supports 9-story building in south Bethlehem

Dennis Benner's B Land Co. LLC is proposing a mixed-use building with commercial space and 37 apartments at W. Fourth and Vine streets in south Bethlehem. (Contributed rendering)

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It's onward and upward for developer Dennis Benner's plan to put a nine-story apartment building in the historic business district that grew up around the Bethlehem Steel plant.

Despite an outcry from residents who believe it's too tall for a block dominated by two- and three-story storefronts, Bethlehem City Council voted 4-2 on Wednesday to approve a certificate of appropriateness for building that would put residents in the backyards of a business district the city has been trying to grow for decades.

The certificate was needed because the project, at 24 and 30 W. Fourth St., sits in the local historic district.

Council President J. William Reynolds said he appreciates the concerns residents brought but said the city has been striving to bring more people downtown, not just to live but also to work.

"I think this project meets those parameters," he said.

Reynolds along with councilmen Michael Recchiuti, Bryan Callahan and Eric Evans voted for the certificate. Council members Adam Waldron and Cathy Reuscher voted against it, saying it did not meet the benchmarks set in the historic guidelines.

Benner's plans call for 37 apartments and a ground-floor restaurant. The \$10 million building was designed with a tapered top floor, carefully designed windows, cornices and a rooftop garden to create an airy effect in an attempt to downplay the height.

At 96 feet, the building falls below the zoning cap of 150 feet in the central business district, but per historic guidelines the building has to be consistent with surrounding buildings.

Several tall buildings, including the Steel General Office building and 13-story Rooney Building, dot the landscape but the buildings on the first block of West Fourth Street, like the ones where Blue Star Cafe operate, are smaller in scale.

Critics argue Benner's project is the very type city leaders tried to guard against when they created the district 16 years ago, some saying it would look just as out of place as the Rooney Building.

But Mayor Robert Donchez, who voted for the historic preservation district as a councilman, said it is just the type of development the city needs to bring cash-carrying residents back to the downtown and invest in the businesses occupying the very historic buildings the city is aiming to preserve.

The debate became heated at times as it has wended through the South Bethlehem Historic Conservation Commission, where members approved it 5-2, and on to City Council.

On Wednesday, more than two dozen people spoke against the project during the 3 1/2-hour public comment period, arguing the project flies in the face of planning studies the city has commissioned over the years and wouldn't help businesses in the way some city officials believe it will.

Rather than bringing more residents to the business district, they argued the density is there and the city should look for ways to bring the existing people already there into the business district. That means smart development, building upon the historic neighborhood and creating public spaces.

Stephen Barron Jr., president of the South Bethlehem Historical Society, urged council to delay the vote to study the issue more.

"I find hard to believe the only thing that would be profitable would be a nine-story building," he said.

Former restaurateur Lucy Lennon, now a Realtor who counts Benner as a client, named four South Side businesses that have closed and said the vitality that the business district used to see is waning.

"It used to be that First Fridays, you couldn't get down the street," said Lennon, one of two audience members who spoke for the project Wednesday. "Now, you could roller skate down them."

Benner has argued that the scale is needed to make the project financially feasible. No other developers have brought plans for that vacant corner at West Fourth and Vine streets.

The corner has been earmarked for redevelopment by the city. It was included in new, lucrative tax incentive district called the City Revitalization and Improvement Zone. The CRIZ will allow Benner to use certain state and local taxes to offset some of the construction costs in so long as the project adds jobs to the economy.

Besides a review of the city authority overseeing the CRIZ, the project must also be approved by the Planning Commission.

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