

Stephen C. Antalics Jr.: 'Theater of the absurd' playing out in Bethlehem

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If a playwright were to script the deliberations of the South Bethlehem Historic Conservation Commission's certificates of appropriateness for 217 Broadway and 24-30 W. Fourth St. in Bethlehem, along with the actions taken by City Council on these resolutions, it could be titled "The Theater of the Absurd."

Since both sites are well within the South Bethlehem Historic Conservation District, no building permit can be issued until it is given a certificate of appropriateness by the commission, meaning the work would not violate historic guidelines delineated by Ordinance 1714.

Greg Salamoni, the owner of the Broadway Social restaurant, was given approval by the commission to replace the garage door of the renovated fire house at 217 Broadway with a six-panel by five-panel door. However, the door that was delivered and installed was six panels by four panels. The commission rejected the replacement. City Council must vote on all certificates of appropriateness and held two lengthy sessions to resolve the issue, eventually supporting the commission's denial of Salamoni's plan.

The fascinating aspect of this is that council, although agreeing with the commission, felt that the board was "nit-picking," that the door was very attractive and greatly added to the quality of the area. It finally decided it would not force him to remove it.

Contrast that with deliberations on a nine-story building at 24-30 W. Fourth St. — proposed by developer Dennis Benner. The guidelines for approval of this project should be from Section 10 of Ordinance 1714. It states in part: "New construction should relate to the dominant proportions, size and scale of period buildings (1895-1950)." I take that to mean buildings should be three to four stories tall to fit in with the general character of the area.

In October 2014, the commission voted 5-2 to approve the Benner plan. The no votes were cast by the only two Southside Bethlehem residents on the commission. Beth Starbuck, the commission chair, initially felt that the scale of the building was inappropriate, but then voted in favor. She cited Hotel Bethlehem, which is nine stories, as a rationale for her support. "Nobody freaks out about that," she said.

Why would someone freak out about it now? The hotel was built in 1922 by Charles Schwab and I am sure Mr. Schwab did not need a certificate of appropriateness to build. The hotel is the cornerstone of Main Street, near the Hill-to-Hill Bridge. Would a nine-story building be allowed downtown on Main Street today?

The absurdity continues. At a very contentious, standing-room-only meeting that lasted more than five hours, City Council approved the certificate of appropriateness for the Benner project against the will of the vast majority of citizens in attendance, including some professional city planners.

The major theme of council's argument for approval was the very favorable economic impact of the project. The solicitor for City Council cautioned members that a yes or no vote should be predicated only by the historic aspects of the certificate according to Ordinance 1714 and not economics. One council member stated that historic content is only a "sliver" of these deliberations. Council violated its own ordinance.

Consequently, the South Bethlehem Historic Society, an independent and nonprofit group, has taken legal action against the city to reverse this decision. A court hearing has been set for Tuesday.

The hypocrisy was also seen last December at another South Bethlehem Historic Conservation District meeting, which concerned the issue of an inappropriate sign for a martial arts school at 25-27 E. Fourth St., a block from the Benner project. The meeting deteriorated into a rancorous shouting match — over a sign — much below the dignity one would expect of a professional commission. Ms. Starbuck retorted emphatically: "We are charged with preserving the historical integrity of the area." A decision is pending.

Again, historic districts are being assaulted. On the north side, for example, the administration is contemplating a zoning change to allow a residential dwelling at 2 W. Church St. to be converted to a commercial office building. In South Bethlehem, Mr. Benner also proposes a seven-story office, penthouse and retail complex at Third and New streets and another complex of undetermined height at 15 W. Fourth St. to include apartments, a restaurant and a hip bar.

When will City Council and the administration amend their image in the eyes of many citizens that it is not partial to private interests but to the welfare of those who elected them?

Stephen C. Antalics Jr. of Bethlehem is a retired scientist and entrepreneur.

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