

## Dennis Benner proceeding with plans for 7-story building in South Bethlehem

Dennis Benner Third and New building April 2015

Developer Dennis Benner is proceeding with plans for a new 7-story building at Third and New streets in Bethlehem. These are renderings he submitted to the city in April 2015. (Courtesy image | Howard Kulp Architects)

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on April 22, 2015 at 10:08 AM, updated April 22, 2015 at 4:02 PM

I want to be very selective in terms of tenants."

Developer Dennis Benner is proceeding with his long-held plans for a 7-story building at Third and New streets in **Bethlehem**.

Another view of the proposed 7-story building at Third and New streets in Bethlehem.

Courtesy image | Howard Kulp Architects

**Benner originally intended six floors of offices with first-floor retail on the corner** but his new plans submitted to the city show one floor of retail, four floors of offices and two floors of apartments.

His plans will go before the South Bethlehem Historic Conservation District for review at 7 p.m. Monday at Town Hall.

Benner said he has strong interest from office, apartment and retail tenants but doesn't yet have any signed leases for the building. He said having approval for the building's design plans would help in securing tenants.

"You really need to know what you have before you can know what you can sell," he said.

The building will likely contain several restaurants and bars, he said. Plans show six retail spaces in the building.

"I want to be very selective in terms of tenants," Benner said.

The building will have 18 penthouse-style apartments on the upper two floors, he said. He said he envisions the apartments will be attractive to young professionals and employees of Lehigh University.

Benner said he's still investigating if his tenants will use the **site's City Revitalization and Improvement Zone benefits**. The zone gives developers state and local non-property taxes generated from new businesses to use for construction.

Bethlehem Mayor Bob Donchez said he strongly supports the project and likes that it has office, retail and apartments as the combination will bring even more people to the South Side business district.

"He's making a tremendous investment and I think it's something that South Bethlehem needs," Donchez said. "It's a prominent location because it's a gateway coming into the city. You're looking at a piece of property that's been vacant for a number of years since the fire."

The new building would be built atop the former Third Street Chicken and Ribs and Greekers restaurant, **which was destroyed in an August 2009 fire**. The building site also includes the former Maze Garden – which many community members fought to save – along with three commercial buildings on South New Street.

Benner's plans for a 9-story building at Fourth and Vine streets were closely critiqued by the South Bethlehem Historic Conservation District **but the historic review board eventually approved those plans in a 5-2 vote last year**. Bethlehem City Council, which has the final say on new development within the South Bethlehem historic district, also approved those plans.

**The South Bethlehem Historical Society has filed a lawsuit to stop the construction of the 9-story building**, saying its design doesn't fit with the district historic guidelines for new development. Other community members also opposed the 9-story building and will likely weigh in on the 7-story building, as well.

South Bethlehem Historical Society President Stephen Barron Jr. said he couldn't say yet if the society will get involved legally with the 7-story building until the plans are voted on. He also said the group will find out Tuesday if he has standing in its suit over the 9-story building, which will be a factor in any future involvement.

But Barron said he doesn't see how a 7-story building would fit into the historic district of primarily 2-and-3-story buildings. He said he also finds it hypocritical that the historic board allowed a 9-story building but gives others a hard time over handicap ramps and paint colors.

"I don't see a 7-story building fitting there," Barron said. "But I'll let the process play out and see if the board has a role."

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