

Seven stories of apartments, retail pitched near Lehigh University



7-story building pitched in south Bethlehem: building would include student housing and commercial uses. A historic panel has raised questions about the height.



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BETHLEHEM — Recent [Lehigh University](#) graduate Dallas Basha wants to turn a tiny, empty lot near the campus of his alma mater into a seven-story building of student apartments and a ground-floor restaurant or shop.

But members of the city's Historic Conservation Commission raised questions about whether that pencil-like structure belongs at 13 W. Morton St., a lot flanked by 2½- and three-story storefronts such as popular Lehigh hangouts Tulum and Saxbys.

The width-height ratio exceeds the historic district's other taller buildings — including six-story building under construction at Third and New streets. It also exceeds the average floor-area ratio in Manhattan, according to

city historic officer Christine Ussler.

“Based on several methods of analysis, it is recommended that the maximum height for a building in this location be four stories,” Ussler said in her analysis to the board.

The commission reached a consensus that the proposed height was too tall, voting to table the application until the plans are revised.

Andrew Twigg, who represented Basha before the commission, said he would take commission’s feedback to Basha, whose company, Lehigh Properties LLC, owns the lot.

Basha did not attend the meeting.

Twigg said he did not have a timeline as to when the plans would be revised.

The property sits on the edge of the local historic district, where exterior changes to the building must be reviewed by the commission and approved by City Council.

The historic district is prized for the downtown that grew up around the former Bethlehem Steel plant from 1895-1950. While many are two or three stories tall, some closer to Farrington Square, a gateway to the campus, are 5½ stories. Those buildings, however, lay outside the historic district.

Historic Conservation Commission member Roger Hudak said seven stories is too high for that block.

“Student housing is going to be a very important part of Lehigh’s expansion of an additional 1,000 kids and 800 graduate students,” Hudak said, “As a South Side resident, I don’t want to see any more neighborhoods bought up for student housing.”

Lehigh has announced it plans to add up 1,800 undergraduate and graduate students over the next seven to eight years. Lehigh is planning a 400-bed **dormitory** on its campus around the corner at West Packer and Brodhead avenues. A Lehigh spokeswoman said the university is not involved in the Morton Street proposal.

Basha said in an interview earlier Monday he wants to build something that he could be proud of in that neighborhood. He declined to specify whether his plan could be adjusted for a smaller building.

The project had raised questions among those part of Lehigh’s South Side Initiative, a group of Lehigh faculty, students and staff that fosters dialogue on community issues.

Member Breena Holland, a Lehigh professor, said a seven-story “toothpick-like building” behind all the lovely, historic buildings on Fourth Street is “simply out of scale” and, if approved, would encourage other developers to buy up shorter structures and build high rises.

“Given the amount of out of scale development approved in the historic district in the last few years, it’s imperative that the expertise of [the conservation commission] be respected by the city.”

Holland compared it to a nine-story building proposed at Vine and Fourth streets. The commission approved it, but developer Dennis Benner has yet to build it.

Under construction at New and Third street is a six-story office and retail building developed by Benner. The building, which will include offices for Lehigh and St. Luke's University Health Network, is to be connected to a 626-spot garage also under construction there. Benner lopped off a floor of the office building, originally proposed to be seven stories, after his initial appearance before the historic conservation commission.

Alicia Miller Karner, director of the Bethlehem community and economic development department, said the administration has had no conversations about the project and does not yet have a position.

Jessica Lee, president of the South Bethlehem Historical Society, which unsuccessfully appealed the nine-story building several years ago, said she had alerted members to the meeting on the project, but the society has not taken a position.

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