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South Bethlehem development should focus on reuse, not tall buildings, residents say

Lehigh University South Side Initiative South Bethlehem meeting

Panelists Samuel Nazario, Mike DeCrosta, Andy Po, Olga Negron, moderator Seth Moglen and Lehigh University South Side Initiative Chairwoman Breena Holland take part in an initiative discussion on development in South Bethlehem. (lehighvalleylive.com photo | Lynn Olanoff)

Lynn Olanoff | The Express-Times By **Lynn Olanoff | The Express-Times**

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on April 29, 2015 at 9:27 PM, updated April 30, 2015 at 11:12 AM

Attendees at a Wednesday meeting on South Side **Bethlehem** development called for the reuse of the Bethlehem Steel General Office building and Home & Planet, instead of new tall buildings.

Two South Side business owners said they don't think the city should pin its hopes on the three new tall buildings proposed for the neighborhood. Both **Sands Casino Resort Bethlehem** and Lehigh Riverport were supposed to revitalize the neighborhood and they've haven't, Homebase Skateshop owner Andy Po and Deja Brew Coffeehouse & Deli owner Jeff Vaclavik said.

"We were told when Sands comes, South Side Bethlehem is going to be this crazy place of business," Po said. "My business is not successful because the Sands is there."

About 50 people attended **the Town Hall Lecture on "Responsible Development and the Future of South Bethlehem."** The event was co-sponsored by the city and Lehigh University's South Side Initiative.

Vaclavik pointed out the opening of Lehigh Riverport also was supposed to be a boon to the neighborhood and it hasn't been.

"Where are all the residents of Riverport who were going to flood the South Side and flock to our stores? There's no one – no one is even living there any more," Vaclavik said.

Vaclavik said the city should rally to get a new business into the former Home & Planet storefront in the same way city officials pushed to reopen Hotel Bethlehem. He said the store should have been included in Bethlehem's City Revitalization and Improvement Zone because it is that important to the neighborhood.

Others pushed for the city to prioritize the redevelopment of the former SGO building on East Third Street.

"We have to look at what we have already there – I wish the politicians would lean on the owners of that building to do something with it," said Roger Hudak, a South Bethlehem resident who is chairman of the Mayor's South Side Task Force.

South Side resident Olga Negrón also pointed out Bethlehem, and the Lehigh Valley's, tallest building -- Martin Tower -- is a large, empty building that has been difficult to redevelop.

"We really need to think about marketing these tall buildings in our neighborhood," Negrón said. "We need to redevelop what we have."

Developer Dennis Benner has proposed three tall buildings -- 13, 9 and 7 stories -- in the South Bethlehem business district, **which some residents and business owners have been fighting.**

Po pointed out a lot of the landlords who declined to rent to him when he was opening Homebase in favor of holding out for stores like The Gap when Sands opened still have vacant storefronts today. He advocated for the city to crack down on absentee landlords to encourage more spaces for small businesses to rent.

"It was a small business community that made South Bethlehem the envy of the Lehigh Valley," Po said.

Lehigh graduate student Mike DeCrosta pointed out the only successful CRIZ project thus far has been the Social Still, which is one building being operated by a local business.

"I think we can get a lot done if we think on a smaller scale and more local scale," DeCrosta said.

Editor's note: *A previous version of this story said that meeting attendees pushed to have the Bethlehem Steel General Office building included in the City Revitalization and Improvement Zone. The building is in the zone.*

Lynn Olanoff can be reached at lolanoff@express-times.com. Follow her on Twitter [@LynnOlanoff](https://twitter.com/LynnOlanoff). Find **Bethlehem news on Facebook.**

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