

South Bethlehem historic panel tables plans for high-rise

By **Nicole Radzевич**
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Would a seven-story office, apartment and retail building generate "17-hour-a-day" foot traffic that would help revive a historic shopping district at a south Bethlehem gateway?

Or would the high-rise change the character of the downtown that grew up around Bethlehem Steel, overshadowing the two- and three-story buildings of mom-and-pop shops and restaurants?

Those are some of the questions the South Bethlehem Conservation Commission began to wade through Monday night.

After a 1 1/2-hour meeting that drew nearly 50 people, commission members said they still need more information before deciding whether to recommend demolition of three buildings — 306-10 S. New St. — to make way for the new building near the foot of the busy Fahy Bridge.

The new building would wrap around the corner of New and Third streets, near the entrance to Campus Square, near Lehigh University, and have up to six retailers or restaurants on the first floor, 18 apartment units on the top two floors and four floors of offices in between, according to the plans submitted under Greenway Park L.P.

The plans show different setbacks of the facade, meant to mimic the rhythm of various storefronts in the district's past, and use glass and tapering to minimize the effect of the building's height.

Commission members said they like parts of the plan but questioned some of the details, including the corner entrance that has a mall-like feel and the use of some of the building materials.

The plans also lacked renderings of the buildings from elevations facing the west side and the side facing the Greenway, a rails-to-trails park that runs through the South Side retail district.

"To me, it's not something that we're able to vote on tonight," Commissioner Craig Evan said. "It's not ready for prime time as far as I'm concerned."

The commission asked the developers to go back to the drawing board to revise the plans to incorporate their feedback.

Brandon Benner, one of the owners in Greenway Park L.P., noted after the meeting that he and his brother went to Lehigh University and want to make the downtown a better place. He said two of their tenants have already left the South Side for Easton, and time is of the essence.

"We're disappointed," Benner said.

It's unclear whether the commission will ultimately support seven stories. Two members indicated they do, one didn't and two said it depends. Their recommendation will be forwarded to City Council, which will determine whether to issue a certificate of appropriateness for the project.

Certificates are required in that local historic district for demolitions, new buildings and exterior alterations.

Mayor Robert Donchez has praised the plans for improving on rundown buildings, including a property that's been idle for six years after a fire, and bringing office workers during the day and residents during the evening in the backyards of businesses.

City historic adviser Christine Ussler said the proposed building has many features that are compatible with the neighborhood, but the biggest incompatible feature would be the height.

At 121 feet, it is well below the 150-foot threshold for the zoning district.

The historic district calls for the buildings to be compatible. While that block is dominated by two- and three-story buildings, officials point out there are other tall buildings nearby, including the Flatiron building and Northampton Community College's satellite campus.

Breena Holland, a Lehigh University professor, said if the historic district is going to have a big building, the entryway into the district is where to put it. However, she had issues with parts of the design. She said the entrance made it look like a modern mall and urged the design be changed so it doesn't have a generic feel.

"I still don't understand what this building relates to in the district," which highlights architecture from 1895-1959, she said.

Dennis Benner, a principal in Greenway Park, first unveiled the high-rise plan in November 2013 as Bethlehem competed for, and ultimately won, one of two City Revitalization and Improvement Zones. In the zones, developers can use portions of local and state taxes generated from the development toward construction costs.

Around the corner at Fourth and Vine streets, Benner has proposed a nine-story building of apartments and a ground-floor restaurant, but a group of residents is appealing that project.