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South Bethlehem business owners split on need for 9-story building in neighborhood



South Bethlehem business owners are split on whether they support this proposed building at West Fourth and Vine streets. (Courtesy image)

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on November 01, 2014 at 6:00 AM, updated November 01, 2014 at 6:11 AM

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It's the chief reason **Bethlehem** council members give for their support for a controversial 9-story building in South Bethlehem: **Neighborhood business owners are desperate for more customers.**

And some South Side business owners see the proposed building at West Fourth and Vine streets that way.

"It would be nice if we could get some new things built with new people moving into the neighborhood," said John Saraceno, who has owned Saraceno Design in the neighborhood since 1983. "What we need is a vibrant downtown."

But not everyone thinks the building that would contain a restaurant and 37 apartments would do that much for the neighborhood. Opponents' greatest concern is the building's height.

"It sounds horrifying," said Joe Hanna, who has owned Play It Again since 1981. "I think they should be keeping with the character of the neighborhood."

The site is within the South Bethlehem Historic Conservation District, where a historic review board and then city council get to rule on new construction in the neighborhood.

The historic review board voted 5-2 earlier this month to approve the building despite concerns over its height. Some board members also cited the project's expected economic development impact as a reason for their support.

Brenna Holland, head of Lehigh University's South Side Initiative, said the district's guidelines don't allow economic impact as a consideration in new construction.

"It's clear the potential economic impacts of this building are driving much of this process, but those interests are explicitly not supposed to be part of it," said Holland, **who has been outspoken against the 9-story building.**

Bethlehem Councilman Bryan Callahan said he feels it is council's role to consider the economic impact in addition to a building's historical appropriateness.

"All I hear from the business owners is 'When are we going to do something for the South Side?'" Callahan said. "They always say we need more feet on the ground – a lot of them are one more bad winter away from closing."

City council is scheduled to vote on the 9-story building at its 7 p.m. Wednesday meeting. Councilmen Eric Evans, Michael Recchiuti and J. William Reynolds also have voiced support for the building, which would be enough for approval along with Callahan's vote.

Saraceno admits South Side business owners are split on the 9-story building, but he thinks it's something the district can deal with.

"It's like the same size of the Hotel Bethlehem," Saraceno said. "Is that screwing up Main Street? I don't think so."

Eskandalo owner Alison Leigh said she has no concerns about the building's height.

"I'm not afraid of progress or anything," she said. "I think people will have to accept it – we let Dunkin' Donuts in, we let other businesses in that are chain businesses."

Leigh said her greatest concern is how the building's construction might affect West Fourth Street traffic. She hopes consideration will be given to existing businesses so customers have no problems accessing them.

While Deja Brew Coffeehouse & Deli owner Jeff Vaclavik said he has some concerns about the building's height, he also said his greatest worry is access to his business during construction. He said he's cautiously optimistic the 9-story building will be fruitful for the neighborhood.

"I'm all for progress and revitalization, and I want to see more people on the street," he said. "I just don't know if it's the way I'd prefer to do it."