

# Bethlehem to consider 9-story building in historic South Side



This nine-story apartment building proposed for Bethlehem's South Side has sparked controversy because of its height. (HOWARD KULP ARCHITECTS, CONTRIBUTED RENDERING)

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Of The Morning Call

OCTOBER 30, 2014, 10:10 PM

**C**learly, the nine-story apartment building that developer Dennis Benner wants to put up in south Bethlehem is no Martin Tower, Bethlehem Steel's 21-story homage to industrial might.

Not even half the size of the Lehigh Valley's tallest building, Benner's architects designed the apartment complex with tapered top floors to disguise its 96-foot height in a business district of mom-and-pop shops rising just two or three stories.

But some critics argue there is no hiding nine stories. It's the type of development, they argue, city leaders tried to guard against 16 years ago when they created a historic district to protect the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century architecture along Third and Fourth streets on the South Side.

"It's not just about one nine-story building," said Michael DeCrosta, a Lehigh University graduate student in sociology and a vocal critic of the project. "It's about the history and the future landscape of the South Side."

Several tall buildings already dot the streetscape, including the former Steel's 13-story General Office Building, the six-story Flat Iron Building and church spires that rise higher than the trees. Tall buildings, Benner's supporters

argue, are a part of the history of the South Side where Steel developed the H-beam, which provided the structural strength to build skyscrapers.

And Benner's tall building would put cash-carrying residents in the backyards of merchants and restaurateurs investing in the very architecture that the historic district was designed to preserve.

"We've been talking about the revitalization of south Bethlehem for 30 years. Now, we have an opportunity for ... some major development that will bring people to south Bethlehem," said Mayor Robert Donchez, who supports Benner's project. "We need foot traffic to support the businesses there."

In a city where the Council on Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat was founded, City Council next week will consider whether to grant the project a certificate of appropriateness, prompting it to answer the question: How tall is too tall?

If he gets approval to build his \$10 million apartment tower with ground-floor restaurant at Fourth and Vine streets, Benner will buy two adjacent vacant, rundown buildings near popular businesses such as the Blue Sky Cafe.

Without immediate care, officials say the two buildings would likely be condemned. Developers put the renovation cost upward of \$360,000, making reuse of the buildings unlikely.

It's an underused corner, just west of New Street, that Bethlehem officials have targeted for redevelopment. That corner got more interest last year when the city included it in a special tax break district, the City Revitalization and Improvement Zone.

Enter attorney-turned-developer Benner. He pitched a trio of projects along the western part of the South Side business district in the city's winning application for the CRIZ. Benner's concept in the application was multistory buildings.

"Taller buildings are going to be more of the norm. The reason why is the big push for reurbanization. People want to live downtown. They want to work there. They want to play downtown," Benner said in an interview. "When you are in an urban environment, you are short on lateral real estate and forced to go up."

Benner in March obtained a certificate of appropriateness for a seven-story mixed-use building at Fourth and Vine, then replaced that plan with a 12-story building after getting an agreement to buy a second lot at 24 W. Fourth St. After public backlash, Benner, with input from city planners, developed the nine-story proposal with the tapered top and cornices.

The first seven stories would look very much like what was previously approved, with brick, glass and concrete panels on the upper floors, and a limestone and glass storefront on the first. The eighth level is detailed and the top floor is set back 5 feet on three sides to create a penthouse with rooftop green space. Large areas of glass with smaller solid panels between them are proposed to give the top floor a lighter, airy effect.

"It was redesigned ... to make it look as if the structure is smaller," said Alicia Miller Karner, director of the city's Community and Economic Development Department.

After a pair of heated meetings, the South Bethlehem Historic Conservation Commission recommended on a 5-2 vote that City Council issue the certificate of appropriateness for the nine-story proposal, a requirement for buildings in the historic district. Commissioner Beth Starbuck, who expressed initial reservations, said she was

swayed by looking at the Hotel Bethlehem, a nine-story Main Street landmark surrounded by three-story buildings.

"Nobody freaks out about that," she said at the meeting.

But, in a letter to Donchez, South Bethlehem Historical Society President Stephen Barron said Benner's project flies in the face of planning and historic studies the city has commissioned over the last decade.

"If this development is allowed, the unique sense of place that we have all come to know and love as south Bethlehem would be compromised significantly," Barron wrote.

Breena Holland, a Lehigh University associate professor, suggested Benner's building would look just as out of place as one a block away, the 13-story Rooney Building, which she described as a mistake. The neighborhood character, she said, would be disrupted by a tall building that blocks the sunshine and scenic views of Lehigh's tree-covered campus on South Mountain.

Kim Carrell-Smith, a 25-year South Side resident and Lehigh professor, argued the "very large, out-of-scale building" does not conform to historic district guidelines. The Flat Iron and General Office buildings are blocks away, but smaller buildings are next to Benner's property, she argued.

The city's historic guidelines describe Fourth Street as "predominantly brick" two- and three-story buildings, ranging from modest working-class housing to Queen Anne-style Victorian houses.

Seth Moglen, a 15-year resident of the South Side and a professor at Lehigh, questioned whether a new nine-story building would even be considered in the historic Main Street where the Central Moravian Church campus and Main Street Commons sit like bookends.

"One thing you have to ask yourself: Are you valuing the historical integrity of our community on the South Side in the way you would value the historic integrity of north Bethlehem?" Moglen asked council earlier this month.

Benner called the districts "two different, distinct places." The north side, he said, features grand homes and other architecture that never fell into disrepair; on the South Side, parking lots have replaced the Eagle Hotel, and other noteworthy buildings have fallen into disrepair decades ago.

"Regrettably, in south Bethlehem, most of that historic integrity is long gone," Benner said. "So, you have a lot of in-fill stuff. You can't build a town one shop at a time, or it will take 100 years."

At 96 feet, Benner's proposal falls below the 150-foot threshold for central business zoning requirements. But development also is subject to design guidelines, which say the building height should be compatible with surrounding buildings, and historic guidelines, which say construction should reflect dominant cornice and roof heights.

"In south Bethlehem, where two- and three-story buildings are the norm, buildings that digress from these standards by any great degree seriously impact the Historic Conservation District," the guidelines say. "If large-scale construction is considered, particular attention will be given to the location, siting, setbacks ... facade treatments ... and the effect of the proposed building on the streetscape and Historic Conservation District as a whole."

Karner, of the city's development department, said Benner's design aims to make the building more compatible

with the neighborhood.

The guidelines, she said, also promote buildings that would house both businesses and residences, providing people the ability to live, work and shop in the same area — all goals of the Benner project.

"When you have people living in the buildings, that's exactly the way you are going to create a sense of place," Karner said.

The feet on the street is what the owners of Soto Santi Pizzeria Pub and Molly's Irish Grille and Sports Bar, nearby businesses in south Bethlehem, championed before the historic commission.

Councilmen Bryan Callahan, Eric Evans, Michael Recchiuti and J. William Reynolds said this week they support the Benner project. If they're stances hold Wednesday, Benner will have enough votes for the resolution to pass.

"There's a lot of economic impact that this project will have on the downtown area. It will put a lot of extra feet on the street and bring students down from Lehigh and into town, something that we've wanted to do for a long time," Callahan said,

Council members Cathy Reuscher and Adam Waldron, who have met with some of the residents who oppose the project, are still weighing the arguments.

Councilman Adam Waldron said he is keeping an open mind.

"I agree that is definitely a concern," Waldron said, referring to the building height. "The question is: Does the potential economic impact outweigh that issue?"

If council answers "yes," Benner will continue with his project with stops at the Planning Commission and the city's authority overseeing the CRIZ.

A closer look

The project: Nine-story building with a restaurant, 36 apartments

The location: Fourth and Vine streets, south Bethlehem

The developer: B & L Development, a company of developer Dennis Benner

What's next: Bethlehem City Council will decide whether to issue a certificate of appropriateness Wednesday

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