

Proposed 12-story South Bethlehem building breaks historic district rules, professor argues

12-story building

The South Bethlehem Historic Conservation District tonight will weigh in on plans for this 12-story building at West Fourth and Vine streets. *(Image courtesy of Howard Kulp Architects)*

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Guidelines for constructing new buildings within South **Bethlehem's** historic district say new structures should match the existing predominant two- and three-story building heights.

That makes Breena Holland, a Lehigh University an associate professor of political science and the environmental initiative, question how a 7-story building was approved for a district with now a 12-story building being considered.

Developer Dennis Benner earlier this year received city approval to build a 7-story building within the district at West Fourth and Vine streets and **is now seeking to instead construct a 12-story building on the corner.** His plans for the taller building are before the South Bethlehem Historic Conservation District board tonight.

"I'm having a hard time understanding why this commission would view a 7-story building — much less a 12-story building — as compatible or sympathetic with the existing ambiance of the historic district," Holland said.

"The commission's previous recommendation of a 7-story building makes me wonder whether there is any commitment to maintaining the existing ambiance of the historic district, or whether there is a step-by-step effort underway to create a new norm and ambiance simply because it will bring in more tax dollars quickly," she said.

Holland raised her objections to **Bethlehem City Council** — which has final say on the building's design — last month. She also plans to broach her concerns at tonight's meeting.

Historic district board member Craig Evans said he supported the 7-story building because its height would have been similar to a nearby former church on West Fourth Street.

"The discussion on that had centered around the fact that if it were seven stories, it was consistent with the height of the building across the street," Evans said. "And to mitigate some of the visual impact, the top floor

was set back from the actual building."

Evans said he can't say how he will side on the 12-story building until he sees the detailed plans for it tonight. **Benner also plans to propose a 13-story building and another 7-story building in the district,** both of which Evans said he'll have to see plans for before weighing their heights.

Historic district board member Seth Cornish said he doesn't think a building should be denied in the district just because of its height. In addition to the 14-story Rooney building at Fourth and New streets, there also is the 6-story flatiron building that Cornish said is a contributing member to the historic district.

"When you look at comparing size, if they're all two- or three-story buildings, at some point, a city needs to build higher than that," Cornish said. "When you look at Manhattan, you wouldn't have a building that was 80 stories back in 1840."

Holland argues the flatiron and Rooney buildings shouldn't be used as justification for additional taller buildings as they're the only two buildings out-of-scale with the rest of the neighborhood.

Whether to allow the 12-story building will ultimately be decided by city council, which rules on the historic district board's recommendations. Councilmen J. William Reynolds and Bryan Callahan said they will wait to see the plans before making a final decision but say they may consider approving the 12-story building because of the new residents it would bring to the business district.

Benner's building is proposed to have 22 apartments along with first-floor retail space. He didn't return a call for comment on this story.

"When you look at Third and Fourth streets and the investment the city has made, and the investments the businesses have made, I think what's missing is people walking around," Reynolds said. "In general, I support projects that bring people into our downtowns."

Callahan also said he believes the building would provide a big boost to the business district and said what matters most to him is how the building looks, not its height.

"If the façade matches and flows with the rest of the buildings there, I would likely support it," Callahan said. "One of our jobs is to weigh not just the historical factor but the economic factor."

The South Bethlehem Historic Conservation District meets at 7 p.m. tonight at Risbon Board Room at the Banana Factory at 25 W. Third St.

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