

Most Bethlehem City Council members received contributions from developer seeking approval for 9-story building

benner 9-story building

Five of seven Bethlehem City Council members received political contributions from a developer seeking their approval to build a controversial 9-story building in South Bethlehem. *(Courtesy image)*

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

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on October 23, 2014 at 6:45 AM, updated October 23, 2014 at 6:50 AM

Five of seven **Bethlehem City Council** members received political contributions from a developer seeking their approval to build **a controversial 9-story building in South Bethlehem.**

Bethlehem resident Emily Gibbs disclosed the contributions from developer Dennis Benner at Tuesday's city council meeting.

"I really hope none of this influences the decision you make," Gibbs, a Lehigh University graduate student, said to council.

Benner has proposed a 9-story building with a first-floor restaurant and 37 apartments at West Fourth and Vine streets. **Some residents say the building's height is out of place in the South Side business district** and they've organized against its construction.

The building is within the South Bethlehem Historic Conservation District and requires city council approval for construction.

Councilmen Bryan Callahan, Eric Evans, Michael Recchiuti, Adam Waldron and J. William Reynolds all received political contributions from Benner last year. Callahan, Waldron and Reynolds also received contributions from Benner's sons.

The councilmen said the contributions from the Benners won't influence their vote on the building, which is expected to take place Nov. 5.

"Dennis was a supporter of mine – which I appreciate – but it's not going to weigh my decision," said Callahan, who received \$1,500 from Benner last year as well as \$250 each from Brandon Benner and Garrett Benner, who also are attorneys and developers.

Callahan said he's undecided if he'll support the 9-story building. He said he's weighing the neighborhood's historic integrity against the neighborhood's need for an economic shot-in-the-arm.

"It's a tough situation for everybody – there are a lot of residents over there for it and a lot against it," Callahan said. "It's going to be a difficult balancing act."

Reynolds received \$2,000 last year from Benner along with \$650 from Brandon Benner and \$450 from Garrett Benner. **He's already voiced his support for the 9-story building and said the contributions weren't a factor.**

"I've received a lot of support over the years from many people throughout the city of Bethlehem," Reynolds said.

Evans, who received \$500 from Benner last year, also said the developer is just one of many supporters.

"Dennis Benner was one of a hundred contributors to my campaign," he said. "He's a well-respected attorney who has completed several great developments in the city of Bethlehem and I was happy to have his support."

Evans said Benner's 9-story building meets city zoning requirements but he'll weigh the concerns raised by residents at this week's council meeting before deciding Nov. 5.

Recchiuti received \$1,000 from Benner last year.

"The money is not a factor -- I'm supportive of the redevelopment project on the South Side in general," he said. "I think it's a good project."

Waldron received \$500 from Benner and \$100 from his son, Brandon. He said the contributions wouldn't influence his vote on the 9-story building, which he is still undecided about.

"All these yard signs are expensive," Waldron said. "People don't run for city council for the money."

Benner said he's made contributions to just about every politician in the Lehigh Valley. He said he sees it as a way to help those in what he calls a "thankless business."

"If someone wants to come out and do civic duty and they need a little help to do that civic duty, I help them," he said.

Bethlehem Mayor Bob Donchez also received \$2,500 from Benner last year. He doesn't have a vote on the 9-story building but has declared his support for it.

Contributions from the Benner family to Bethlehem officials in 2013:

Bryan Callahan:

\$1,500 from Dennis Benner

\$250 from Brandon Benner

\$250 from Garrett Benner

Bob Donchez:

\$2,500 from Dennis Benner

Eric Evans:

\$500 from Dennis Benner

Michael Recchiuti:

\$1,000 from Dennis Benner

J. William Reynolds:

\$2,000 from Dennis Benner

\$650 from Brandon Benner

\$450 from Garrett Benner

Adam Waldron:

\$500 from Dennis Benner

\$100 from Brandon Benner

Source: Campaign finance reports on the Bethlehem City Council website

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