

Bethlehem conservation group gives OK to South Side building



By **Kevin Duffy,**

Special to The Morning Call
Tribune

OCTOBER 21, 2014, 9:33 PM

The South Bethlehem Historic Conservation Commission has backed a developer's proposal for a nine-story building on the city's South Side.

The advisory group on Monday voted 5-2 in favor of developer Dennis Benner's proposal to construct the mixed-use building at West Fourth and Vine streets.

After working with the city on revisions to the building's height and character, Benner's B Land Co. LLC is proposing commercial space at street level with 37 apartments, ranging from one to three bedrooms each, occupying the upper floors.

The commission's recommendation was conditional on the developer coming back for a review of shop drawings and materials.

City Council will vote on the plan at its 7 p.m. Nov. 5 meeting.

Chairwoman Beth Starbuck said she initially thought the scale of the building was inappropriate, given the character of the surrounding structures, but decided to vote in favor of the new building.

Nearby, she pointed out, is Hotel Bethlehem, which stands nine stories tall and is surrounded by buildings that only reach three stories.

"Nobody freaks out about that," she said.

Commissioners Mary Pongracz and Craig Evans voted no.

Howard Kulp, of Howard Kulp Architects, said the developer is in talks to bring a restaurant in as the ground-floor tenant, with outside seating.

A wrap-around cornice will be featured on the seventh floor, he said, with the top floor including a penthouse set back 5 feet from the building edge. A landscaped roof is also planned that will be available for use by all tenants.

Gary Lader, an architect who serves on the commission, said he would like something included in the design to unify the ground level, to be made of limestone and glass, with the subsequent brick-and-fiber cement panels above.

Like others on the board, he said he was uncomfortable with the proposed building height.

"I'm struggling with the scale like everyone else," he said.

After starting at 13 stories and then proposing seven, Kulp said they'd done as much as they could to blend into the

surroundings.

"If we took it down another story the economics don't work," he said.

Alicia Karner, Community and Economic Development director, said Benner worked with the city to make the design more palatable, adding the cornice, spacing the windows farther apart and reconfiguring the brick pattern.

"It was more vertical in design," she said.

If approved by City Council, two vacant buildings which abut the project site would have to be razed.

Timothy Finnegan, who owns the Blue Sky Cafe which abuts one of the abandoned buildings, said he was concerned with the integrity of the stone-and-mortar foundation of his 100-year-old building being compromised by work to construct the building's foundation.

"His building will abut against mine — I don't see how that's possible," he said.

Another resident, Kim Carrell-Smith, said she doubted that the "very large, out-of-scale building" conforms to established guidelines within the historic district.

Local business owners Charles Patrick and Anthony Spagnola spoke in favor of the proposal.

"I'm all for it. I think business brings business," Spagnola said.

Christine Ussler, city historic officer, read a letter into the record opposing the project from South Bethlehem Historical Society President Stephen Barron Jr.

Any project brought to the city should incorporate scale, mass and architectural design that is consistent with the historic district, he wrote.

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