

South Bethlehem historic board approves 9-story building after previously panning it

benner 9-story streetscape

After voicing strong opposition last month to a proposed 9-story building on West Fourth Street, the South Bethlehem Historic Conservation District voted 5-2 Monday to support the building's design. *(Image courtesy of Howard Kulp Architects)*

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After voicing strong opposition last month to a proposed 9-story building on West Fourth Street, the South Bethlehem Historic Conservation District voted 5-2 Monday to support the building's design.

District board Chairwoman Beth Starbuck said she had been very troubled by the building's height until she realized Hotel Bethlehem also was nine stories and doesn't stick out badly on Main Street.

"I'm not happy with the scale of this, either, but I'm less freaked out about it -- it just never occurred to me that the Hotel Bethlehem is that tall," she said.

The board makes recommendations to Bethlehem City Council, and board Historic Officer Christine Ussler said there's a fear if the board is often overruled by council "this developer and other developers will get the sense we don't count."

Bethlehem Mayor Bob Donchez and some city council members have already voiced support for the 9-story building, which would be on the corner of West Fourth and Vine streets. Council is expected to consider the plans Nov. 5, officials said Monday.

Some Bethlehem residents have gathered in opposition to the plans. They also are concerned about developer Dennis Benner's other plans for 13-story and 7-story buildings in the neighborhood.

"We're worried about this building -- the precedent it sets," resident Michael DeCrosta said.

Several South Bethlehem business owners weighed in at Monday's meeting with mixed opinions. Sotto Santi owner Anthony Spagnola was strongly in favor while Homebase Skateshop owner Andy Po and Molly's Irish Grille & Sports Pub co-owner Chaz Patrick said while they want more business in the neighborhood, they also favored its historic integrity.

"I feel there's a way both parties -- all parties -- can work together to see progress come to the South Side," Po said.

Timothy Finnegan, who owns the building adjacent to the site of the proposed 9-story building at 20-22 W. Fourth St., said he has very serious concerns about how the new building would affect his 100-year-old building.

"I just don't see how it's possible to put a 9-story building with a proper foundation without any damage to my buildings," he said.

Benner's architect Howard Kulp said they haven't yet done any in-depth engineering studies because they didn't know if they would be permitted to build the 9-story building in the historic district.

The building is proposed to have 37 apartments and is expected to have a first-floor restaurant, Kulp said.

Starbuck said the board has to consider other elements besides the building's height, and noted the setbacks and materials fit the historic guidelines. Board member Gary Lader said while he had some concerns about the scale, he was most concerned about how it looked from the street level and felt it fit.

Board member Carolyn Facchiano said she was worried the board may be setting a precedent by considering a building's economic impact but ultimately voted in favor of the building. Members Seth Cornish and Philip Roeder also voted yes with members Craig Evans and Mary Pongracz voting no.

"When you tear something down it must fit in with the neighborhood – that's the rule," Pongracz said. "We are doing the wrong thing here by not following the city ordinance."

All three of Benner's proposed South Side buildings are within Bethlehem's new City Revitalization and Improvement Zone, which provides developers with state and some local taxes to help pay for construction.

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