

Bethlehem developer plans to keep pursuing nine-story South Side building despite opposition

benner 9-story streetscape

Developer Dennis Benner said he would still pursue plans for a 9-story building, pictured above, in South Bethlehem despite opposition from the historic board governing the neighborhood. *(Image courtesy of Howard Kulp Architects)*

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Developer Dennis Benner said he would still pursue plans for a nine-story building on South Side **Bethlehem** despite opposition from the historic board governing the neighborhood.

The South Bethlehem Historic Conservation District last week voted to allow Benner to demolish a home at 24 W. Fourth St. but only after he received the board's approval to construction a new building of "appropriate scale" there. The board ran out of time before it could officially vote on the nine-story building, but many members said they were opposed to its height.

"I intend to pursue plan as presented," Benner said.

"Every project has its threshold -- you can either make it work or you can't," he said. "The nine stories is the threshold."

The historic conservation district board is only an advisory board to Bethlehem City Council, which will have final say on the building's design. Council President J. William Reynolds said he supports the full nine stories, and **council members earlier this year were enthusiastic about Benner's previous plans for a separate, seven-story building on the site.**

"The biggest thing the area is missing in order to increase its vibrancy is having more people down there," Reynolds said, adding about the nine-story plan: "It's not just trying to get people to visit Third and Fourth streets, but to get people to live in the area, and I think this project does that."

Bethlehem Mayor Bob Donchez also said he supports the nine-story proposal, which he said is an improvement over Benner's plans for a 12-story building on the site. Benner earlier this year received approval from both the historic board and city council for a seven-story building at 30 W. Fourth St. but then bought 24 W. Fourth St. and filed the 12-story plan for the two sites combined. **He reduced the 12-story building to nine stories**

before any city hearings were held.

"I'm certainly encouraged to see he reduced the size of the building," said Donchez, who called the nine-story building "very important for South Bethlehem."

Donchez also said he supports Benner's plans for the separate, seven-story building at Third and New streets. The mayor said Benner is working to recruit a major tenant for the proposed office and retail building.

"It would be a game changer," Donchez said of the potential tenant. "There is no doubt that location there will bring foot traffic to Third and Fourth."

Benner declined to comment on the potential tenant for his Third and New streets building.

Donchez said he's unsure, however, about Benner's announced plans for a 13-story building also on West Fourth Street but that he'll reserve final judgment until he sees detailed plans.

"It's a major building," he said.

Reynolds also said he supports the seven-story building at Third and New streets and wants to see more details on the 13-story building. Benner hasn't submitted plans on either of those building but announced them last year.

"Those plans haven't been filed yet, but in general I support projects that increase the amount of people in our main business districts," Reynolds said of the 13-story building.

Breana Holland, chairwoman of Lehigh University's South Side Initiative, **has voiced opposition to Benner's tall buildings** and said she was disappointed he and city officials don't see the value in having them better suit the neighborhood.

"The South Side Initiative is committed to engaging the public in deliberation about these kinds of projects, especially when they are of the scale that Mr. Benner is proposing, and when they are subsidized by the public," she said in an email. "For this reason we plan to continue creating and fostering opportunities for residents, business owners, and workers in Bethlehem to exchange their ideas and concerns about the best design and use of the relevant sites."

Benner's proposed buildings are all within the state City Revitalization and Improvement Zone, where developers get to use state and local non-property taxes toward their new buildings.

The South Bethlehem Historic Conservation District board is expected to continue deliberations on the nine-story building at its 7 p.m. Oct. 20 meeting.

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