

Bethlehem board pans plans for 9-story South Side building

benner 9-story streetscape

A Bethlehem historic board on Monday voiced strong opposition to the construction of a 9-story building on West Fourth Street, pictured above, calling it out-of-scale with the rest of the South Bethlehem neighborhood. *(Image courtesy of Howard Kulp Architects)*

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A **Bethlehem** historic board on Monday voiced strong opposition to the construction of a **9-story building on West Fourth Street**, calling it out-of-scale with the rest of the South Bethlehem neighborhood.

The South Bethlehem Historic Conservation District board voted to allow developer Dennis Benner to demolish a historic building at 24 W. Fourth St. but only after he received the board's permission to construct a building of "appropriate scale" there.

The board in March gave Benner permission to build a 7-story building at 30 W. Fourth St. but members on Monday said they felt his proposed 9-story building stretched over both 24 and 30 W. Fourth St. was far too large.

"I think it's a much bigger mass," board Chairwoman Beth Starbuck said. "I'm having trouble with the size of it — I think it looks out of place."

Benner had urged the board not to focus on the height of his building but rather on the boost it would provide the neighborhood. He described the building as high-end; plans show it would contain a first-floor restaurant and 32 apartments.

"I want to have a town that starts at 5 o'clock, not stops at 5 o'clock, because that's what we have now," Benner said. "Until we have a town that starts at 5 o'clock, we have no vitality. And that means density."

Benner also has announced plans **for a 13-story building and another 7-story building in the neighborhood** but has yet to submit those plans to the city.

Board member Carolyn Facchiano suggested the board take a vote on the 9-story building so it could be turned down and the board could request new plans from Benner but the board ran out of time after a two-and-a-half hour meeting. The board's meeting will be continued to an undetermined future date, members said.

The South Bethlehem Historic Conservation District is an advisory board to Bethlehem City Council, which will have final say over the building's design. Bethlehem zoning laws would allow the height of all of Benner's proposed buildings.

District board member Craig Evans asked Benner why he had dropped **his plans for the 7-story building at 30 W. Fourth St.** Benner said the condition of the home at 24 W. Fourth St. was so bad that he had to buy it and demolish it to make his 7-story building marketable.

"I had to make an attempt to eliminate the blight next door to a very expensive building," he said.

Benner said nine stories are as short as he can go on the two lots to make his project economically viable.

Benner at times got testy with the board, accusing two members of being biased. He accused member Mary Pongracz of being biased for pointing out he didn't fully fill out the board's application.

"If you want to step into the fire, Mary, step into the fire," Benner said.

About three dozen people attended the board's meeting. Twelve attendees offered their opinion on the project to the board, with just one of them supporting it.

"If this 9-story building is approved, what will be next?" Lehigh University student Emily Gibbs asked the board. "Is it all going to be nine, 13, 20 (stories)? If we approve this, we're going to approve anything."

South Side resident Peter Crownfield said he feels the proposed 9-story building would destroy that area of West Fourth Street.

"Mr. Benner knew the historic guidelines when he bought these buildings," he said.

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