

# Historic panel reviews 9-story building plans for south Bethlehem



Contributed rendering of developer Dennis Benner's mixed use project at Fourth and Vine streets in Bethlehem. (Howard Kulp Architects / The Morning Call)

By **Nicole Radzievich**,  
Of The Morning Call

SEPTEMBER 29, 2014, 11:47 PM

**W**ould a nine-story building between Lehigh University and the former Bethlehem Steel plant be so tall that it would destroy the neighborhood's intimate feel?

Or is the apartment and restaurant project the type of development Bethlehem needs to put more residents in the backyards of South Side merchants and restaurateurs who have been working for two decades to build a thriving business district?

Those are the questions the South Bethlehem Historic Conservation Commission grappled with for 2 1/2 hours Monday as three dozen people debated attorney-turned-developer Dennis Benner's proposal for the corner of West Fourth and Vine streets.

Benner had originally gotten approval for a seven-story building that would house a restaurant with outdoor seating and six floors of modern apartments near Lehigh earlier this year, but decided he wanted to go bigger. A month ago, he submitted plans for 12 stories but reduced it to nine after some public backlash.

Benner told the commission that he would love to have renovated the old hotels on the South Side, but those landmarks have been gone for a long time. He said he wants to "look forward," not try to "re-create something that is long gone." He argued his project, which was designed to try to make the size look appropriate to the neighborhood, will bring college students into the district.

"I want to have a town that starts at 5 o'clock, not ends at 5 o'clock, and that is what is happening now," Benner said.

Emily Gibbs, a Lehigh University graduate student, said such a large development might have the opposite effect. She said students like more intimate venues and suggested south Bethlehem follow the lead of Easton, which has made progress.

The comments came during a colorful meeting where a few in the crowd heckled Benner, including one who chastised him for not facing the audience. Benner called on one commissioner to recuse herself after she suggested the application be tabled because Benner did not fill out his email address and phone number on the application form.

At 9:30 p.m., the conservation commission had to end the discussion for the night because the building where they were meeting, the Banana Factory, was closing for the night.

The commission did not vote on the scale of the building, but it did support demolition of the existing building at the site, 24 W. Fourth St., only if certain architectural elements like the door would be preserved and a building of appropriate scale were approved.

"They can't demolish until they have the building permit in hand," Commissioner Beth Starbuck said after the meeting.

Professionals reported that the property is in a state of disrepair. Benner's professionals estimated the project would cost upward of \$360,000.

The commission already approved the demolition of 30 W. Fourth St., a less historically significant building, in March for Benner's original seven-story plan. For that, he pitched a first-floor restaurant topped by a dozen 1,100-square-foot apartments and a rooftop garden.

The conservation district renders an advisory opinion. The final decision rests with City Council.

The project would benefit from the city's new City Revitalization and Improvement Zone tax incentives, which allow developers to use certain state and local taxes to defray the cost of construction.

It's the smallest of three projects Benner has announced he wants to build in south Bethlehem, taking advantage of the special CRIZ incentive.

