Open letter to Bethlehem’s Historic Conservation Commission

I am concerned by the willingness of the Historic Conservation Commission to approve development that is not appropriate for SouthSide Bethlehem.

This letter is prompted by proposals to build in the area bounded by Third, S. New, Fourth, and Vine streets. Proposals include two seven-story buildings, plus a massive thirteen-story building. We certainly need improvements in some areas — but only if sustainable and appropriate for the neighborhood. Unfortunately the recent proposals are neither.

Developers may claim that an appropriately-sized structure would not bring in enough revenue. A few years ago, however, when the Alphagraphics building on Main & Broad Streets was destroyed, the owner replaced it with a structure that is appropriate for that neighborhood in both appearance and size. The same level of care is needed on the SouthSide.

To be sustainable, a building or renovations should strive to minimize resource consumption and for a zero or minimal carbon footprint; it should meet LEED Gold or equivalent standards. It should also be designed to facilitate sustainability by tenants and occupants.

Appropriate neighborhood development was described by visionary community planning expert Jane Jacobs over 50 years ago. (I only learned about her work last year in a conversation with Karen Beck-Pooley, who teaches planning and policy at Lehigh University.) Jacobs documented the importance of a complementary mix of uses, scale and style that fit with nearby buildings, and avoiding too high a percentage of available space built at one time or controlled by a single owner or developer. Jacobs clearly explains the reasons — and the results if they are not followed — in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, published in 1961.

Let me try to apply this to the proposed buildings:

Mix of uses — The projects, taken together do have a mix, but include considerable un-needed commercial space, hundreds of residential units, and 6 floors of office space.

Scale & Style — The structures are at least twice as tall as neighboring buildings, with prominent exterior features of brick, glass, and steel
that clash with historic buildings.

Age and Ownership — The proposed projects would result in a substantial portion of the commercial, office, and residential space in the target area being of the same age and controlled by a single developer.

Sustainability — There has been no commitment to meet the standards for LEED Gold or better— and the buildings seem to be designed to support or even encourage automobile use.

In this area, buildings must also meet specific historic guidelines. According to the South Bethlehem Historic District,

‘New construction should be compatible with the general design, arrangement, texture, and materials in relation to similar features of buildings and structures of the Historic Conservation District’s and streetscape’s period of significance from 1900 to 1950.’

Despite this clear requirement, the Historic Conservation Commission recommended approval of a building that clashes with nearby buildings, despite being in prominent and corner locations that will dominate the view. The presence of buildings such as the Rooney Building or Litzenberger House should not be used as an excuse for approving even more inappropriate structures. Those older buildings detract from the SouthSide and should never have been approved.

Incidentally, many of the same points could be made about the proposed parking structure, which seems to be designed to provide spaces for the proposed buildings. Although they did not even have a study of current parking needs, the Bethlehem Parking Authority used eminent domain to force owners to sell their properties in this area.

The new so-called Community Revitalization & Improvement Zone ['CRIZ'] diverts tax revenue and benefits the developer. These funds should be made available only if the buildings meet the highest sustainability standards, are in full compliance with historic guidelines, and meet the principles of appropriate neighborhood development stated above.

The Historic Conservation Commission is responsible for preservation, not developer profits. If a developer doesn’t know how to develop the property in a way that preserves and enhances the historic character of the
neighborhood, he or she is, of course, free to sell the property to someone who does.

Sincerely,

Peter Crownfield