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# 120-unit Gateway on Fourth apartments clear zoning hurdles in Bethlehem

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*The structures at 1400 and 1414-1416 E. Fourth St. would be coming down if the 120-unit Gateway on Fourth apartment project is ultimately approved.*

BETHLEHEM, Pa. — A 120-unit, mixed-income apartment complex with affordable housing provisions would bring new life to a mostly triangular nook of land at the end of East Fourth Street, officials argued Wednesday.

The two-phase project, known as The Gateway on Fourth, got unanimous approval from the city Zoning Hearing Board for a few variances.

Those included putting 60 dwelling units on one lot where 56 are permitted, reducing required front yard setback from 10 feet to zero and waiving required commercial use for all buildings along the East Fourth Street frontage.

If everything later goes to plan, the nearly four acres at 1400 and 1414-1416 E. Fourth St. would become home to two 44-unit, mid-rise buildings — one at the corner of East Fourth and Williams streets, and another closer to the East Fourth Bridge — and two 16-unit, low-rise buildings along East Fifth. The 44-unit corner building is pitched to have 1,200 square feet of first-floor commercial space.

The lots are now home to the old Szilagyi Fuels building and another shop to the west, with a fenced-in area to the south — all near the South Bethlehem Greenway and Bethlehem Skateplaza.

Just across adjacent Williams Street stands another apartment building built during the last year. And less than a mile west, another developer has eyes on an area of Evans Street to put up 37 apartments.

## **Near other residential uses**

Battling grade changes and a PennDOT easement for the Fourth Street Bridge nearby, developers said the low-rise buildings could maintain a zero-foot setback, as is the case currently for some nearby residential uses.

“We are just over the setback with the actual building, but some of the porches and stoops go right up to the property line, which is generally consistent with the properties that adjoin the property,” said Mark Buchvalt, project manager with T&M Associates of Bethlehem.

City resident Paul Penner, the lone public commenter on Wednesday who lives near the proposed build area, said the proposed setback along East Fifth should be reconsidered.

“I think that it should be closer to 10 feet, maybe not the whole 10 feet,” Penner said. “I don’t think that basing the setback on the existing structures is appropriate in this case.”

## **'Uniqueness'**

Working with the “uniqueness” of the property and its associated financing requirements, the project’s required density, front yard setback and commercial use wouldn’t alter the character of the surrounding neighborhood, said attorney Catherine Durso, of the Fitzpatrick, Lentz & Bubba law firm. Durso represents Pennrose, a firm out of Philadelphia with equitable ownership of the property and experience putting up affordable housing developments.

“The use will not substantially injure neighboring property values and is not otherwise detrimental to the welfare of the community,” Durso wrote in a statement provided by the city. “In fact, having Pennrose develop the property is a benefit to the community.

“The use will be designed and located so that public health, safety, welfare, and convenience are protected.”

## **'A very significant need'**

City Planning and Zoning Director Darlene Heller said the project — which still has a ways to go before any potential construction — supports a “very significant need” for affordable housing in the area.

“For each phase of the 60-unit project, we will apply separately to Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency for federal low-income housing tax credits, which will then get purchased and get private equity back into the project to construct the buildings, along with some other funding provided by various lenders,” said Kelly Yan, developer with Pennrose.

Speaking on the first phase specifically, Yan said her group could make 46 of the 60 units affordable — meaning they would be restricted to households earning 60% of median area income and below.

She said a deed restriction with a 40-year affordability period would run with the land.

### **Rising on donated land**

When the city first began working with Pennrose on the project possibilities years ago, Heller said officials didn't expect much relief to be necessary. With time, that changed.

"It's not relief that was taken lightly," she said. "It really is an approach that is the minimum relief that we could see, too, for the kind of development that would utilize the site in an effective way and in a way that we felt was compatible with what surrounds it."

Justin Ryan, director of business development with Lehigh Valley Industrial Park Inc., said LVIP has entered an agreement of sale with the current land owners — Stacie Dancho and Jeffrey and Charles Szilagyi — to acquire both properties.

From there, LVIP would perform minor site preparations, like cleanup and demolition, before donating the properties to Pennrose.