Bill Scheirer

There isn't much comment that the ZHB is accepting. The rational for the amendment is "irrelevant" because "the ordinance stands on its own.” For the same reason, what was in the council's mind is also "irrelevant,” as is the Mayor's support and the naming rights that have been granted at the police stables, after donations by the wealth management firm. Testimony was allowed on the uncertain number of properties affected by the amendment, but not on the ultimate impact e.g. the effect on Center Street because it is "speculative." Any analysis of the future is not certain but how can you judge the validity of the amendment without thinking about indirect impacts e.g. unintended consequences?

Here is what I wanted to say:

"Like Ed Gallagher, I have been asking the question ‘Why?’ The only argument I have noticed that at least has some rationale to it is the argument that it was not possible to obtain a residential mortgage because of the commercial buildings, and it was not possible to obtain a commercial mortgage because of the residence. I would venture to say that this metropolitan area is large enough that there should be at least one lender willing to take additional risk, albeit at a higher interest rate. In order to compensate for the greater interest, the borrower would then expect a lower selling price. This of course would leave the seller worse off.

But there was another solution. The lot could have been subdivided. I've been told that this would have required a number of variances. But this group has granted a number of variances all at one time in the past. And isn't such a solution easier and therefore better than amending the zoning ordinance? Shouldn't good governance always adopt the easier solution?

But this of course would not have met the objective of the wealth management firm, which was to occupy the residence. So the property was purchased with cash obtained by mortgaging other buildings. A justification was then found to amend the zoning ordinance, a justification with admittedly uncertain impact, aside from allowing the wealth management firm to take over the residence.

You have heard concerns about the impact of this upon the neighborhood, which is also a historic district. If anyone has any possible doubt that this is a real neighborhood, he or she should have been at the social last Sunday evening at the homes of one of the members of the Bethlehem Historic District Association, where at least 92 persons were present in a welcoming and pleasant atmosphere.

Now it is almost a truism that personal services firms like this wealth management firm like to locate in nice residential areas, because it makes their services more personal, unlike an impersonal office building. This is fine for a personal services firm, but it undermines the residential character of a residential neighborhood. The overall effect upon the neighborhood will not be immediate but will happen bit-by-bit. For this action sets the precedent that it will be possible to come up with other strategies of marginal justification to occupy residences.

For example, Center Street is classified by the city's engineers as a "principal arterial.” The only higher classification is "expressway." The next step could be for someone to argue that in view of the volume of traffic on Center Street, it would make sense for personal services to locate there. Gradually the residential character of the neighborhood will erode, until a tipping point will be reached, when the remaining residents relocate to other neighborhoods, and some of them go all the way to the suburbs. In this way a residential neighborhood will be commercialized, as Mary Toulouse told you happened in White Plains, New York.

 Some may argue that this is inevitable as a city grows. This of course begs the questions of whether we actually want Bethlehem to become more populated and/or whether it actually has to grow in this way. For if it does, it will lose a not insignificant portion of its charm that will have attracted people in the first place."