Bethlehem Planning Commission OKs 3 South Side projects

By Daryl Nerl
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The Bethlehem Planning Commission on Thursday approved more than $13 million in new South Side development by signing off on three separate projects.

A 104-room extended-stay hotel, a machine manufacturer with 27 employees, and a mixed-use residential and retail building — all on or very near the Fourth Street corridor — were approved unanimously and without any public objections.
With an estimated development cost of $9.25 million, the Candlewood Suites is the largest of the approved projects. Aimed at business travelers, the four-story, 56,830-square-foot hotel will include a 2,000-square-foot indoor pool with a hot tub and a fitness area.

Located on former Bethlehem Steel land in Lehigh Valley Industrial Park VII, the hotel will have a front facade that faces Fourth Street near Lynn Avenue, though there will be no direct vehicular access from Route 412. Cars will have to enter the hotel parking lot from Spillman Drive.

In approving the land development plan for the project, the commission also approved a subdivision of the 4.15-acre lot, with the hotel development coming on a newly carved 2½-acre parcel. There are no immediate plans for the remaining 1.65 acres, though LVIP President Kerry Wrobel told the commission that his organization is looking to develop it as a restaurant.

Candlewood bills itself as an "extended stay" hotel with a home-like environment. Many suites come equipped with kitchens, full-size refrigerators, dishwashers and cookware. Prices per night average $89-$129, though longer stays usually mean a cheaper rate.

The project, developed by SANN9 LLC, is scheduled to break ground by spring and be open within a year.

Also approved for development in LVIP VII was a new 45,000-square-foot factory for Vastex International Inc., which manufactures screen printing machines that imprint graphics and lettering on T-shirts, jackets, hats and other apparel.

The anticipated $2.4 million construction price is being partially funded with a $1.2 million low-interest loan from the Pennsylvania Industrial Development Authority.

Located on Irving Street in Allentown, the company is "bursting at the seams" in the 23,000 square feet of space it leases, said Vastex President Mark Vasilantone.

"We want to own our own building," Vasilantone told the commission. J.G. Petrucci Co. has been commissioned to build the factory on an 8.25-acre lot at the north end of Emery Street.

The family-owned business was started by Vasilantone's father in 1960 and employs 27 people full time, though the business has been growing at 10 percent a year for the past five years, he said.

Finally, the commission approved a $1.5 million land development plan to take a property previously certified as blighted and build a mixed-use building with eight apartments and space for up to three first-floor shops.

A long-vacant and dilapidated bar sits on the 11,000-square-foot parcel at the corner of Fourth and William streets. Bethlehem-area physician Rajwinder Nagra plans to have the building razed to make way for the new three-story building.
The corner marks the eastern gateway to the mixed-use residential neighborhood off Route 412, and has been identified as a key to neighborhood revitalization by Southside Vision 2020, a public-private partnership that has been working toward improving south Bethlehem since 2001.

Numerous neighborhood leaders praised the project during a Bethlehem Zoning Hearing Board session last month, when Nagra sought and received a dimensional variance for the project.

The ground floor of 1338 E. Fourth St. will be set up with three modular commercial units that can each house separate businesses or be combined to house two shops or one, Nagra said. The two upper floors will each contain four apartment units for a total of six two-bedroom apartments and two one-bedroom apartments, he said.