

CITY OF BETHLEHEM

Inter-Office Memorandum

SUBJECT: Amendment to Zoning Ordinance §1318.23 – Extension of Buffer Yard Protections to Semi-Detached and Attached Dwellings

TO: Members of Council

FROM: Councilwoman Jo C. Daniels

DATE: June 10, 2026

I respectfully request your support for a proposed amendment to Section 1318.23 of the City of Bethlehem Zoning Ordinance to extend mandatory buffer yard protections to Single-Family Semi-Detached Dwellings (twins) and Single-Family Attached Dwellings, in addition to Single-Family Detached Dwellings.

This amendment seeks to correct an inequity in the current ordinance and ensure that all residents receive equal protection from the impacts of adjacent higher-intensity development, regardless of the housing type in which they reside.

Background

The City of Bethlehem recognizes several residential housing types within its zoning ordinance:

- Single-Family Detached Dwelling – a standalone home situated on its own lot.
- Single-Family Semi-Detached Dwelling (Twin Home) – two independently owned homes sharing a common wall.
- Single-Family Attached Dwelling (Rowhome/Townhouse) – three or more homes attached in a continuous row.

All three housing types are permitted residential uses within the RT Residential District and other residential zoning districts throughout the city. Yet under the current language of Section 1318.23(i)(2), mandatory buffer yard protections are triggered only when new apartment development abuts a lot containing an existing detached single-family dwelling.

As currently written, the ordinance excludes twin homes and attached dwellings from receiving the same protections.

Why Buffer Yards Matter

Buffer yards are not merely aesthetic landscaping requirements. The ordinance specifically states that buffer yards serve as barriers to visibility, airborne particles, glare, and noise. In practice, they provide residents with important protections from the impacts of adjacent development.

These protections include:

Stormwater Management Vegetated buffer areas help absorb and slow runoff from new development, reducing localized flooding and protecting neighboring properties.

Air Quality Protection Trees and evergreen plantings help filter dust, vehicle emissions, and airborne particulates generated by construction activities and increased traffic.

Noise and Light Mitigation Buffer yards reduce noise transmission and prevent excessive light spillover into neighboring residential properties.

Privacy and Neighborhood Character Buffer yards help maintain residential character and create an appropriate transition between differing land uses.

Fire Safety Considerations

Fire safety is an often-overlooked benefit of buffer yard requirements and is particularly important for Bethlehem's historic twin homes and attached dwellings.

Unlike detached homes, twin homes and rowhomes share structural elements including common walls and, in many cases, interconnected attic spaces. As a result, fire can spread more rapidly between units once it reaches the structure.

When higher-density development is constructed immediately adjacent to these homes without a meaningful setback or planted buffer, risks can increase through:

- Reduced separation between structures;
- Potential obstruction of emergency access routes;
- Increased challenges for firefighting operations;
- Limited evacuation options for residents of attached housing.

Buffer yards provide physical separation, preserve access, and create additional defensible space that can be critical during emergency situations.

Given these realities, residents of twin homes and row homes need these protections at least as much as residents of detached single-family homes.

Equity and Fairness Considerations

This amendment is also a matter of equity and equal treatment under the zoning ordinance.

According to recent American Community Survey data, detached single-family homes in Bethlehem have an average value of approximately \$328,874, while attached and semi-detached homes have an average value of approximately \$220,674—a difference of more than \$108,000.

Attached and semi-detached homes comprise nearly 28 percent of Bethlehem's housing stock and represent some of the city's most affordable homeownership opportunities.

Historically, Bethlehem's twin homes were built to house the steelworkers, factory workers, and immigrant families whose labor helped build this city. These neighborhoods remain home to many working-class residents today.

Current demographic data also demonstrates that lower-income households and minority residents are more likely to reside in attached and semi-detached housing than in detached single-family homes. Poverty rates among Black and Hispanic residents in Bethlehem remain substantially higher than among White non-Hispanic residents, and renter households face significant housing-cost burdens.

As a result, the ordinance's current distinction disproportionately affects neighborhoods where lower-income and minority residents are concentrated.

While the ordinance does not intentionally differentiate between residents based on income or race, the practical effect is that residents of detached homes receive mandatory protection from the impacts of adjacent apartment development while residents of twin homes and rowhomes often do not.

The result is an unequal distribution of environmental, health, safety, and quality-of-life protections.

The Current Gap in the Ordinance

Section 1318.23(i)(2) currently states:

“A buffer yard shall also be required in the following situations: ... six or more new apartment dwelling units are proposed abutting a lot containing an existing single-family detached dwelling.”

Under this provision, a proposed apartment development adjacent to a detached home triggers a mandatory 15-foot buffer yard.

However, if the exact same development is proposed adjacent to a twin home or a rowhome, no mandatory buffer yard is required.

The difference in treatment cannot be justified by public safety concerns, environmental concerns, or neighborhood compatibility concerns. If anything, the shared-wall construction of twin and attached housing suggests that these residents have an equal—or greater—need for such protections.

Purpose of the Amendment

This amendment would simply extend existing protections to additional residential housing types already recognized by the zoning ordinance.

The proposal:

- Creates consistency within the zoning code.
- Treats residents equally regardless of housing type.
- Improves environmental and public safety protections.
- Supports neighborhood stability and quality of life.
- Advances Bethlehem’s commitment to fairness and equitable planning practices.
- Preserves opportunities for responsible development while ensuring reasonable protections for existing residents.

Request for Support

As elected officials, we have an obligation to ensure that our ordinances serve all Bethlehem residents fairly and consistently. The residents who live in our historic twin homes and row home neighborhoods deserve the same consideration and protections afforded to residents of detached single-family homes.

This amendment does not create a new standard. It simply extends an existing protection to residents who have been unintentionally excluded from it.

I respectfully ask for your support of this amendment and look forward to working with each of you to ensure that Bethlehem's zoning regulations continue to promote fairness, public safety, neighborhood preservation, and equitable treatment for all residents.

Respectfully submitted,

Jo C. Daniels
Member of Council

cc: Stephanie J. Steward, Esquire, City Council Solicitor

BILL NO. ____-2026

ORDINANCE NO. 2026-____

AN ORDINANCE OF THE CITY OF BETHLEHEM, COUNTIES OF LEHIGH AND NORTHAMPTON, COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA, AMENDING SECTION 1318.23 OF THE CITY OF BETHLEHEM ZONING ORDINANCE ENTITLED "BUFFER YARDS."

WHEREAS, the City of Bethlehem seeks to promote equitable land use policies and protect the health, safety, welfare, and quality of life of all residents regardless of neighborhood income level or housing type; and

WHEREAS, Article 1318.23(h)(i)(2) of the Zoning Ordinance currently requires a fifteen-foot (15') buffer yard between certain multi-unit developments and adjoining single-family detached dwellings; and

WHEREAS, the ordinance does not extend the same requirement when such development adjoins other residential uses; and

WHEREAS, Bethlehem City Council recognizes that all residential uses should be equally protected from the impacts of adjacent multi-unit development; and

WHEREAS, the City desires to ensure that zoning protections are applied fairly and consistently across all residential neighborhoods and housing types;

THE COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF BETHLEHEM DOES HEREBY ORDAIN AND ENACT THE FOLLOWING ORDINANCE:

SECTION 1. Amendment. Article 1318.23(h)(i)(2) of the Bethlehem Zoning Ordinance is hereby amended, with strikethroughs indicating deleted text and underlines indicated the addition of text, as follows:

Six or more new apartment dwelling units are proposed abutting a lot containing ~~an existing single family detached dwelling~~ any residential use.

SECTION 2. Repealer. All ordinances or parts of ordinances inconsistent herewith are hereby repealed to the extent of such inconsistency.

SECTION 3 Severability. The provisions of this Ordinance shall be severable and, if any provision thereof shall be declared unconstitutional, illegal or invalid, such decision shall not affect the validity of any of the remaining provisions of this Ordinance. It is hereby declared the legislative intent of the Bethlehem City Council that this Ordinance would have been

enacted as otherwise set forth had such unconstitutional, illegal or invalid provision(s) not been included herein.

SECTION 3. Effective Date. Pursuant to §41608 of the Optional Third Class City Charter Law, this Ordinance shall become effective twenty (20) days from final approval.

Sponsored by: /s/ _____

Sponsored by: /s/ _____

Passed finally in Council this _____ day of _____, 2026.

/s/ _____
President of Council

ATTEST:

/s/ _____
City Clerk

This Ordinance is approved this _____ day of _____, 2026.

/s/ _____
Mayor