

Roanoke Proposes Allowing Multi-Unit Housing Throughout Residential Neighborhoods

Effort to end single-family-only zoning is meant to spur more housing, decrease inequities, city officials say.



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Henri Gendreau

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Roanoke City planners are hoping to make it easier for developers to build small apartment buildings throughout Roanoke's residential neighborhoods as a way to boost housing stock and reduce inequalities.

Above, the Belmont neighborhood of Southeast Roanoke seen in September 2023. FILE PHOTO BY SCOTT P. YATES FOR THE ROANOKE RAMBLER

Roanoke City planners are hoping to make it easier for developers to build small apartment buildings throughout Roanoke's residential neighborhoods as a way to boost housing stock and reduce inequalities.

As Roanoke [faces a shortage of affordable housing](#), city officials believe adopting this trend in urban planning will encourage more housing in areas historically limited to single-family homes. Another intent is to discourage existing economic and racial disparities in neighborhoods.

"The general population is becoming informed about exclusionary zoning practices," Chris Chittum, who leads Roanoke's planning department, said in a December interview. "Every locality in Virginia and the United States that has zoning has some form of this, which is a relic, basically, of past discriminatory practices that were, at best, they were elitist, and at worst, racist."

City planners [are touring libraries this month to educate people about the proposed changes](#) before the planning commission and City Council are expected to vote on them in March.

The proposed package of zoning changes also aims to make opening a nursing home, sober living house or other group living facility easier in mostly commercial areas. But the effort to mostly end single-family-only zoning has attracted the most attention from residents.

Many parts of the neighborhoods circling downtown — including Gainsboro, Old Southwest, Raleigh Court, Wasena and much of Southeast Roanoke — are zoned as "Residential Mixed Density." Under that zoning, city planners propose allowing developers to build up to eight-unit apartments on corner lots and up to four units on interior lots.

Many neighborhoods further out of the city center — including Garden City, Loudon-Melrose and Melrose-Rugby — would mostly be limited to four to six units on corner lots and duplexes and triplexes on inside lots.

In most of South Roanoke and Deyerle, triplexes on corner lots would be the maximum housing density under the city's current proposal.

Virginia cities including Charlottesville and Alexandria have recently rolled back single-family zoning in favor of more dense housing. (Efforts to do so in Arlington County prompted a lawsuit from some homeowners last year.)

Roanoke City staff say the zoning reforms fulfill a pledge from the city's comprehensive plan, which found that residents — including retirees and young families — who may not be able to afford a home want to stay in neighborhoods where they grew up.

Patrick and Susan Moore showed up to a recent city meeting at the Belmont Branch Library. The couple lives in the Countryside area of Northwest Roanoke but volunteers in the neighborhood building houses with Habitat for Humanity. The nonprofit is constructing 40 homes in Belmont-Fallon as part of a city program that uses federal housing funds.

Patrick Moore wondered whether a corner eight-unit apartment in Belmont would make finding off-street parking more difficult. But the couple generally expressed support for the reforms.

"It's a good start," Patrick Moore said. "If you say, get the homeless off the streets, then what are the options?"

"They're faced with a lot of challenges," Susan Moore added, of the city. "Nothing's going to happen overnight."

The couple has also helped build tiny homes in Greensboro.

"They're ahead of Roanoke," Patrick Moore said.



Roanoke City staff say the zoning reforms fulfill a pledge from the city's comprehensive plan, which found that residents — including retirees and young families — who may not be able to afford a home want to stay in neighborhoods where they grew up. A view of Marshall Avenue Southwest on Friday, Sept. 1, 2023, in Roanoke. FILE PHOTO BY SCOTT P. YATES FOR THE ROANOKE RAMBLER

E. Duane Howard, a Southeast resident and frequent critic of city hall, is less impressed.

Howard believes more dense housing will exacerbate long-standing neighborhood issues — which he says includes drug activity, vehicles parked in yards, broken down cars and other code enforcement violations.

“They want to open up houses to more residents with the number of slumlords we have?” Howard said. “The problems are only going to increase.”

City officials stress that residents should not expect to see sudden change: Roanoke is mostly built out, they say, and it will take time for developers to meet the city's shortage of an estimated 4,000 housing units.

Yet there's also room for growth: A 2020 study found about 11 percent of Roanoke homes are vacant — about 5,000 units — and property data show another 5,377 vacant lots in residential areas.

In recent decades, Roanoke's population has stagnated — standing below its high in the 1980s. But more people are living alone or with one other person, compared to large families of generations past that required fewer homes.

James Settle, of the Wasena neighborhood, left a library meeting with yard signs — “Say Yes To Housing” and “Complete My Neighborhood” — that the city has been handing out.

“The single-family mindset over the last 60, 80 years is what has squeezed our supply so much,” said Settle, who lives in a duplex and would like to add another unit above his garage.

Settle used to work in the city's planning department and recalled how back in 2016, Chittum led a more modest effort to ease duplex construction in certain neighborhoods. That proposal met with fierce resistance from residents, and the city dropped it.

“They were like, ‘Not in my backyard!’” Settle said. “It just sort of got put to bed until housing prices got so high.”

Settle noted that, in some aspects, Roanoke's current zoning laws are more restrictive than they were in the past.

“In Old Southwest, there are beautiful old six-plexes that are illegal to build right now,” he said.



At a Melrose Branch Library meeting, resident Amazetta Anderson, center, said her neighborhood still has potential for residential development. PHOTO BY HENRI GENDREAU FOR THE ROANOKE RAMBLER

Housing experts and city officials say the private sector needs to build more housing: The lack of supply, regardless of housing type, is what's causing high costs to rent or own.

Roanoke residents are split almost evenly between owners and renters. Nearly half of all renters are considered “cost-burdened” — meaning they spend more than 30 percent of their income on housing — and about a quarter of owners are cost-burdened, according to the city.

Chittum said previous zoning reforms have moved the needle.

In 2021, the city allowed developers to build multifamily housing in commercial districts without going through public hearings for a rezoning.

Shortly afterward, developers turned a former Sheraton Hotel complex off Hershberger Road into more than 300 apartments, and a former Days Inn on Orange Avenue became apartments.

“We think that removed a barrier for them to go ahead and do that,” Chittum said.

“Developers like predictability.”

John Harlow, who lives on the edge of the Raleigh Court neighborhood, questioned whether the zoning changes will actually result in a critical mass of new housing.

“The risks associated with changing single-family communities are greater than the likelihood that it will increase access to housing,” said Harlow, who also owns rental properties.

“There are differences between owner-occupied properties and tenant-occupied properties,” he said. “Owners of real estate, single-family homes are typically their largest investment, so they treat it that way. If you don’t own the building you live in, your approach to it can be vastly different.”

At a Melrose Branch Library meeting, resident Amazetta Anderson said her neighborhood still has potential for residential development.

“Until we have near adequate housing that we can afford, we’re going to have homelessness,” Anderson said. “With the deficits that we have, we have to learn to be more ... accepting of other people.”

Jane Gabrielle, who also lives in the Melrose-Rugby neighborhood, said she knows of three empty houses on her block that could be turned into more housing.

“Anything that’s going to knock out those kinds of eyesores and bring something positive to the community is a good thing,” Gabrielle said. “Change has got to come.”