

Roanoke Planning Commission Advances End to Single-Family Zoning in Bid for More Housing

City Council is expected to vote Monday on reforms staff say is aimed at increasing housing and decreasing racial and economic inequities.



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An end to single-family-only zoning has advanced in Roanoke after the city's planning commission on Monday recommended reforms that staff say is aimed at increasing housing and decreasing racial and economic

inequities. Above, a view of the Belmont neighborhood seen from the Mill Mountain Star Overlook Friday, Sept. 1, 2023, in Roanoke. PHOTO BY SCOTT P. YATES FOR THE ROANOKE RAMBLER

An end to single-family-only zoning has advanced in Roanoke after the city's planning commission on Monday recommended [reforms that staff say is aimed at increasing housing and decreasing racial and economic inequities](#).

City Council is expected to vote on the measure at its meeting Monday evening.

In Roanoke's more dense residential neighborhoods, the code change would allow developers to build up to four-unit apartments on interior lots and up to eight units on corner lots.

Minimum lot sizes would also be reduced, which could allow for three homes on a property previously limited to one home, for example.

Planning commissioners voted 5-1 on the proposal, with James Smith opposed and Pamela Smith absent. James Smith said he would be more comfortable with a study on the potential cumulative impact of the changes.

"This is a huge change. ... I see so many independent variables try to get towards the outcome," he said. "We quote a bunch of statistics and studies, but are we going to get what we think we're going to get?"

Chris Chittum, who leads the city's planning department, said staff's "quick and dirty calculations" show the reforms could result in 50 new housing units per year. But he predicted it would be far less than that in reality.

"We're going to see a slow rate of change that we will monitor," Chittum told commissioners. "This is removing a barrier that will at least help; it's not the solution."

Roanoke needs 2,162 more housing units by the end of next year, according to a 2020 study funded by the Roanoke Valley-Alleghany Regional Commission. That study found the incomes of 64 percent of households are mismatched with their housing cost, which is why planners believe more housing will help with an affordability crisis. Lack of supply, regardless of housing type, is what's causing high costs to rent or own.

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.)

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.

Eight residents, about evenly split, on Monday voiced support and opposition to the idea before planning commissioners.

Isabel Thornton, executive director of Restoration Housing, predicted the reforms will have a limited and positive effect.

"It's very unlikely that this is going to spur deconstruction and new construction," she said. "I see it as more of an opportunity to spur rehabs and redevelopment on vacant land."

Thornton, whose business restores historic homes, said she's heard concerns that the zoning changes could lead people to raze such single-family homes in favor of building a four-plex, for example. But she believes developers would find that cost-prohibitive.

"The problem is not density," she said. "The problem is slumlords, vacancy and blight, and this will help reduce all of those."

Anthony Stavola said it's no question Roanoke needs more housing.

"For a neighborhood to be healthy, it needs a mix," he said. "But the question is, 'What's the right mix?'"

Stavola said previous zoning changes in Roanoke neighborhoods led to resident concerns about home maintenance and street parking. He said the latest changes inject uncertainty to neighborhoods where households that may make their biggest financial investment into a home.

"We're telling those residents, just listen to the experts, shut up, and pay your taxes," he said.

In most parts of neighborhoods near the city center — such as Gainsboro, Old Southwest, Raleigh Court, Wasena and Southeast Roanoke — apartments of up to eight units on corner lots and up to four units on interior lots would be allowed under the proposal.

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.

The purpose of Residential Agriculture — the least-dense zoning which applies to much of the Evans Spring woodlands — would also be redefined as to maintain agriculturally productive lands “and to hold land for future development in reserve.”

Besides for the Residential Agricultural zoning, the city's proposal would also reduce the minimum lot size per dwelling unit, by as much as four, depending on the zoning district.

The reform package also introduced a new zoning district — Urban Center — which city staff say will apply to areas such as the Riverdale development at the former American Viscose Company plant.