

Late-night city council filibusters did not halt a zoning overhaul from passing in Roanoke, even as two members and some citizens expressed lukewarm sentiments toward the sweeping changes.

Temper on city council boiled over Monday night, late into a prolonged meeting, before a 5-2 vote to approve a long list of technical zoning changes that planners said will have positive long-term effects on neighborhoods.

Before Monday, Roanoke's zoning codes represented "a persisting legacy of both racial and economic segregation," while also contributing to the city's housing shortage, planners said.

That's because most of Roanoke's land area is only zoned for single-family homes, stifling availability of other home styles such as, for example, town houses, duplexes and courtyard apartments.

Those are among the "missing middle" forms of housing that benefit people seeking smaller, less costly places to live, planners said. Allowing more dwellings desired by young professionals and aging-in-place elderly people helps to complete the predominantly single-family neighborhoods, they said.

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Wasena, planners said. But still, there's a housing shortage of at least 4,000 units, creating availability and affordability problems, which also impacts homelessness, they said.

Filibuster slows but does not stop Roanoke zoning reform

So the zoning reform that passed late Monday night made code changes intending "to remove barriers for the creation of affordable housing," in addition to comprehensive definition and permitted use changes.

Councilwoman Stephanie Moon Reynolds and Councilman Luke Priddy voted against the 58-page ordinance. The complex and far-reaching series of changes met with some support from community leaders, and some opposition from homeowners.

Of the 22 people who spoke during the 65-minute public hearing, more than half expressed opposition. They listed increased housing density, unchecked slum lords, infrequent code enforcement, possible impacts to housing prices, and cramped street parking among their concerns.

But some citizens and leaders from homelessness assistance organizations said the changes could help people who are currently living on the streets.

Deputy Director of Planning, Building and Development Jillian Papa Moore said the zoning reform for complete neighborhoods is the most impactful work of her 20-year career.

"This is a really exciting topic for us planners," she said. "And also for our community and what it means for the city of Roanoke."

While the zoning changes won't become apparent overnight, or even perhaps within a year or more, it should help over the long term, working in addition to other, more immediate city efforts on housing issues, planners said.

"Roanoke has an opportunity to show leadership on the issue of zoning reform throughout the Commonwealth," said Katharine Gray, land use and urban design planner.

Housing studies have demonstrated the acute need for more units in Roanoke, and this is one of several approaches the city is trying, said Zoning Administrator Phillip Moore.

“We really poured a lot of time and thought into these proposals,” Moore said.

But some city council members wanted to spend more time. Before the 5-2 vote to approve the zoning changes, Moon Reynolds motioned to table the discussion until April.

“Doing so will demonstrate a commitment to thorough decision-making,” Moon Reynolds said.

But that motion failed with only support from Priddy, who led a long question session that started late into the meeting. He spent about 10 minutes asking city planners about topics ranging from blight to windmill heights, before Mayor Sherman Lea interrupted.

“Is that relevant to what we’re talking about here?” Lea said.

It was almost four hours into the city council’s 7 p.m. meeting, after extended remarks from Moon Reynolds, Councilman Peter Volosin and Vice Mayor Joe Cobb. Already by then, City Attorney Tim Spencer had reminded the council that it is legally required to vote on continuing the meeting later than 11 p.m.

Priddy went 10 more minutes talking about small details of the zoning reform package. At last, there was one more thing Priddy wanted to ask, “and the clerk will hate me for it,” he said.

“I would ask that those ‘whereas’ statements be read,” Priddy said. “Before we take our vote.”

Priddy

FILE, The Roanoke Times

could have been answered,” Lea said. “I don’t know why we get out here in front of a crowd and throw questions out.”

Lea said to stick to the facts. He said the council needed to make a decision, not punt for later.

“This is an omnibus piece of legislation,” Priddy said. “We have a major piece of legislation, and I do want to make sure if something goes through, that the public is comfortable.”

Lea said the city planners aren’t going anywhere. He said council members should be more prepared before meetings.

Lea
File, The Roanoke Times

“If you come in this building like I do three or four times a week, we see them,” Lea said. “We can ask them questions.”

Agreeing with Lea, Councilwoman Trish White-Boyd said she called the planning staff and asked them questions prior to the meeting.

“You can actually pick up the phone and reach out to them,” White-Boyd said. “That’s why I have a lot of my questions already answered.”

The council members who did vote in favor of passing the zoning reforms, including Councilwoman Vivian Sanchez-Jones, each said they wanted to hear periodic staff reports on the policies’ impacts, to make sure any citizen concerns do not become problems.

“That’s it,” Sanchez-Jones said. “Short and sweet.”

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