

Changes to Roanoke's zoning code up for public debate once again

The changes, which took effect in March, sparked a lawsuit against the city. Now the amendments are up for reconsideration, starting with Monday's public hearing.

by [Samantha Verrelli](#) August 12, 2024

Changes made this spring to Roanoke's zoning code to address a critical housing shortage will again be up for public debate Monday at a planning commission public hearing.

The amendments resulted in a homeowners' suit against the city, which argues that the city did not follow procedure before adopting the amendments and claims a "rushed process."

Facing the prospect of drawn-out legal action, the city launched a process to bring the amendments back before the public. Following Monday's hearing, the planning commission will again vote on whether to recommend the changes to the city council, which will then take up the amendments.

As of now, residents shouldn't expect substantial changes — most likely it will consist of "clean-up" work and minor tweaking, according to Chris Chittum, acting assistant city manager.

In the meantime, the changes approved by the city council in March remain in effect.

The changes allow for greater housing density in Roanoke's residential neighborhoods, doing away with exclusionary zoning that only allowed for single-family housing. It made it easier for builders to build multifamily housing and allows for homeowners to add accessory units to their properties.

The planning commission and city council began discussing the need for zoning amendments in 2018 as a part of the development of Roanoke's City Plan 2040, which included neighborhood workshops and community meetings. The plan, which was adopted by the city council in 2020, called for new policies that would permit a range of housing options in every neighborhood.

The city's housing problem is twofold: a lack of affordable housing and a lack of developable land.

A 2021 Virginia Tech study found that over half of Roanoke's residents are cost-burdened, meaning at least 30% of their income goes toward paying for their rent or mortgage. It also found a lack of 4,500 housing units in the city.

Roanoke's housing density is only at 40%, or less in some areas, of what's allowed — meaning that even with greater housing density allowed in the new code, the city is still not projected to be near maximum-allowed density. The zoning changes that took effect in March aren't expected to bring major changes, he said: only a 3% change in density over the next 30 years.

The zoning changes that were passed by the city council in March were first introduced in early February with a briefing at a city council meeting. There were then seven public meetings throughout the month of February, according to Chittum. The planning commission made the recommendation on March 10 to move forward with the amendments, and the city council passed them on March 18 in a 5-2 vote.

After hearing from residents who feel their input hasn't been taken seriously, city officials say they're hearing the community's input in zoning decisions.

Vice Mayor Joe Cobb last week urged residents to read the reports that have been published about the changes — and to contact him or other council members if they want to have a conversation about them.

"For some people, being heard means do what I'm asking, or do what I say," Cobb said. "Maybe we've achieved some compromise that's also representative of what it means to be heard."

But Anthony Stavola, one of the homeowners who sued the city this spring, said he doesn't have high hopes for any outcome of Monday's public hearing.

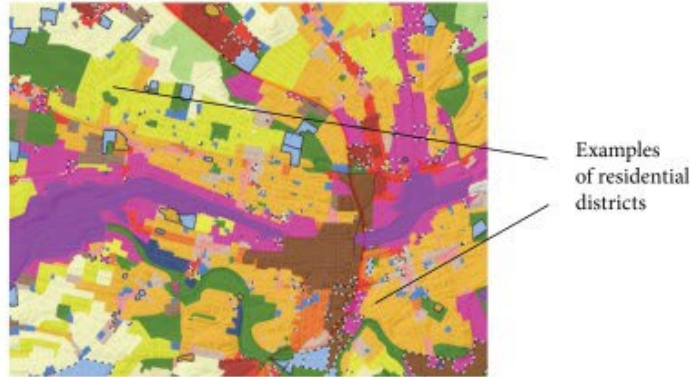
"There was a flawed process in developing the amendments, and it came out with a flawed product," Stavola said last week. He said homeowners haven't been able to "have a two-way conversation" with planning staff. The lawsuit is pending, and Stavola hopes for more conversation between the city and residents in the meantime.

New zoning in Roanoke

The Roanoke City Council in March passed a number of amendments to the city's zoning ordinance that were designed to allow for greater density in some residential areas. This table outlines some of the most significant changes that took effect in March, as well as additional changes that are currently under discussion.

To see which zoning district a specific address falls under, use the city's interactive map: <https://gisre.roanokeva.gov/js/>

The picture below is from a Roanoke zoning map. Yellow and orange areas are residential districts. It is from a zoning reform study posted on planroanoke.org.



	Prior to March 18, 2024	Effective March 18, 2024 (current code)	Proposed
Maximum number of dwellings per corner lot	1	BY ZONING DISTRICT: RM-1: 8 RM-2: No limit R-3: 6 R-5: 6 R-7: 4 R-12: 3	No recommended change
Maximum number of dwellings per interior lot	1	BY ZONING DISTRICT: RM-1: 4 RM-2: No limit R-3: 3 R-5: 3 R-7: 2 R-12: 1	No recommended change
Minimum area for a dwelling unit (in square feet)	BY ZONING DISTRICT: RM-1: 3,500 RM-2: 2,500 R-3: 3,000 R-5: 5,000 R-7: 7,000 R-12: 12,000	The minimum area is reduced in most districts: RM-1: 1,500 RM-2: 1,000 R-3: 1,000 R-5: 1,500 R-7: 2,000 R-12: 2,500	Numbers are being discussed but are not likely to change
Minimum lot area when subdividing land (in square feet)	BY ZONING DISTRICT: RM-1: 5,000 RM-2: 5,000 R-3: 3,000 R-5: 5,000 R-7: 7,000 R-12: 12,000	The minimum lot area is reduced in most zoning districts: RM-1: 4,000 RM-2: 4,000 R-3: 3,000 R-5: 4,000 R-7: 5,500 R-12: 8,000	No recommended change
Minimum lot frontage when subdividing land (in feet)	BY ZONING DISTRICT: RM-1: 50 RM-2: 50 R-3: 30 R-5: 50 R-7: 60 R-12: 70	Minimum frontage is decreased in some zoning districts: RM-1: 40 RM-2: 50 R-3: 30 R-5: 40 R-7: 50 R-12: 60	No recommended change
Accessory dwellings	Accessory dwellings allowed by right as accessory structures.	Accessory dwellings are also allowed on a main structure, limited to 800 square feet or 80% of gross area of the principal dwelling (whichever is less).	Allows separate metering for accessory uses and structures.