

Balancing the tensions between preserving green space and providing more housing

Readers of our Cardinal Way project on civic course weigh in about housing issues.

by [Dwayne Yancey](#), December 26, 2023

We've all seen this: People say that a locality needs more housing, particularly rental housing, but then when a proposed development comes along, the reaction is "Not in my neighborhood!"

We see another variation of that playing out in Roanoke right now. There seems to be general recognition that the city, perhaps all of Southwest and Southside, needs more housing. However, there's also currently opposition to developing a specific location in Roanoke — the mostly wooded [Evan Springs neighborhood](#). That, of course, raises the question of, if not there, where should new housing go?

I [wrote recently](#) about how demographics are driving a lot of development decisions, including those in Roanoke and Pittsylvania County. As part of our [Cardinal Way](#) project on promoting civil discussions, we recently invited [Roanoke developer Robert Fralin](#) and [Isabel Thornton of Restoration Housing](#) to write essays offering ways for people to think about these tensions between the need for housing but the difficulty in locating it. We also asked readers for their feedback.

One question we asked was a two-parter: Do you support construction of apartments in your locality? What about in your neighborhood?

All but one person who responded said "yes" to both; only one person said "no." That, of course, is not what we see at rezoning hearings.

Jeanne Bollendorf offered this qualified support on apartments: "I support them if they are truly affordable and if proper plans are made to address traffic concerns. The studio apartments created in the old Lee theater building on Williamson Road are an excellent example of the type of apartment development I support. I'm also very much in favor of the work Restoration Housing does." However, she wrote, some projects are proposed for the wrong place. "A couple of years ago an apartment complex was slated for our neighborhood of Hershberger Road. There was available land for a very dense development. Although the housing is needed, I was not much in favor of it because there were insufficient answers to dealing with additional traffic on Hershberger Road, which is very narrow in that area and, there also would have been large amounts of traffic in the surrounding neighborhood. Somehow that project never materialized."

Virginia Sweet offered another qualification: "As long as apartments are constructed away from creeks and ... do not clear-cut urban forests, apartments are welcome."

Another question we posed was: What advice would you offer elected leaders when evaluating development of green spaces? That prompted a range of answers, most of them leaning toward the redevelopment side of things.

"Encourage rehab of existing residential areas before green spaces = in-fill, multi-story, renovation, etc.. and then green space ...," Mike Branch wrote.

No one disputed the value of green space, although there were different views as to how much of a priority green space should be.

“Green spaces must be respected, but sometimes the need for development, especially affordable housing, is of greater value to the community than the green space that would be developed,” Dan Crawford wrote. “Retaining trees needs to be a priority.”

Meanwhile, Bollendorf wrote: “Development of green spaces should be at the very bottom of the list. There are vast amounts of already developed spaces that are vacant and in need of rehabilitation. Once a green space is developed, there is no reversal. I would much rather have the city spend tax dollars rehabbing spaces and providing the right infrastructure for businesses to relocate or for a developer to create affordable housing. If green spaces are in private ownership, I’m in favor of the city purchasing and holding vacant or placing under a conservation easement.” (That would be the case in Evans Spring, for instance. That land is privately owned and zoned in such a way that those owners currently have the right to develop the land; they just haven’t.)

Peggy Layne offered a unique insight from Blacksburg: “Blacksburg has done a good job of encouraging the redevelopment of older apartment complexes, increasing density in complexes close to the Virginia Tech campus to accommodate the growth of enrollment at the university. The town struggles to make housing affordable for families and working folks because developers can make more money on student housing. People who are able to afford to purchase a home for use only during football games also reduce the availability and increase the cost of housing for permanent residents. To protect the rural character of property on the borders of town, leaders need to allow increased density of development within the town limits.”

One consistent theme that ran through many of the responses: protect trees. While green space is more than trees, that seemed to be one way that many readers measure it. “We must preserve mature trees, prevent further flooding and run-off that harms the environment,” Sweet wrote. “Health, safety, and well-being of area residents associated with the rising heat index need to be paramount. Climate change has to be addressed immediately.”

And then there was this comment from Eric Chapman: “Keep walkability in mind. Look for density close to schools and public transport. And remember that the housing needs far outstrip the projected pipeline of projects.”

Cardinal Way will be back in the new year with a new set of essays for readers to consider.