

Roanoke City Council again votes for zoning changes

Monday's 6-1 vote makes only minor changes to the zoning amendments passed in March, but it could have an impact on a pending lawsuit against the city.

by [Samantha Verrelli](#) September 17, 2024

A disputed set of zoning changes that took effect in Roanoke this spring, allowing for greater housing density in residential districts, will remain in place with a few minor changes following a vote by the city council Monday night.

After hearing from 34 residents during a standing-room-only public hearing, the Roanoke City Council voted 6-1 to approve a minor, procedural rewrite of the zoning amendments, with a number of the council members saying that ordinances prohibiting multifamily housing in some neighborhoods is segregating and does not promote a diverse city.

The council first voted to update the zoning ordinance in March, by a vote of 5-2. But a group of 13 homeowners sued the city, claiming it had not followed proper procedures for advertising the vote and holding public hearings.

In response, city staff rewrote the amendment package, with small changes, to be run through the approval process again. In August, [the planning commission voted 3-2](#) against recommending the rewritten amendment package to the council.

The council voted to approve the package anyway. Minimal changes approved Monday night include clarification of some regulations and allowance for separate metering for accessory structures. The changes reduce the minimum width of a townhouse from 25 to 15 feet, and remove some stipulations on garages and parking.

Unknown for the time being is the status of the lawsuit against the city, and the council's next steps.

After the public hearing, City Attorney Tim Spencer said that in his opinion, "a great deal" of the lawsuit has been mooted.

Anthony Stavola, one of the plaintiffs in the suit against the city, said they "are not giving up." He said he and the other plaintiffs will be looking to the coming city council and mayoral election. Three council seats and the mayor's seat are up for election in November, and Stavola said that some of the candidates opposed the amendments.

This whole process began when the council decided to eliminate exclusionary single-family zoning in residential districts, in an attempt to address a dire need for housing in the city. The problem, said Chris Chittum, director of planning, building and development, is scarcity of housing and developable space. He said solving this scarcity problem should help affordability, too.

The council chamber was full Monday night, with nearly every seat in the room taken and the walls lined with a standing crowd. The 34 speakers who addressed the council were split on the issue, with 18 in favor of the readoption and 16 against.

Roanoke residents from a variety of backgrounds and occupations addressed the council: younger people looking to stay in Roanoke but unable to afford it; older folks living in the same homes they have been for decades; builders; and landlords.

Robert Brown, a doctor who said he came to Roanoke in 2010 to attend the Virginia Tech Carilion School of Medicine, said he “can think of no greater welcome than what [the council] passed in March” for a young professional like himself who is paying off loans.

Some speakers expressed confusion about how the city could guarantee that the amendments would result in affordable housing. A few said that they thought more time was needed to look into long-term effects of the zoning changes. Many spoke on the idea of progress and the discriminatory history of zoning.

Council member Peter Volosin assured the crowd, “We’ve heard you.” He voted for the reapproval on the grounds that exclusionary zoning is discriminatory and of the Jim Crow era.

“I think the single most important reason for changing our zoning code is ending segregation,” Volosin said. “For over a century, the same reasons have been given for why we should keep single-family zoning: changing a neighborhood’s character, bringing crime, lower property values. Does this sound familiar?” he asked, using air quotes around each reason that he listed.

“I’m embarrassed that I spent 12 years plus on this council and didn’t realize we had segregation in zoning,” said council member Beverly Fitzpatrick. “This is a common-sense decision.”

Member Trish White-Boyd said the zoning ordinance “isn’t perfect,” but the city has made important changes.

The Roanoke City Council voted 6-1 to again approve a slate of amendments intended to increase housing density in the city. Stephanie Moon Reynolds cast the sole “no” vote. Photo by Samantha Verrelli.

Vivian Sanchez-Jones said the proposal is “in the best interest of our city’s future,” citing rising enrollment in the city’s schools as proof that in fact the city’s population is growing.

Stephanie Moon Reynolds cast the only vote against the amendment reapproval. She said she would have preferred the issue to have been tabled, especially with a new city manager coming in the near future. She said she “cannot comprehend” a new manager coming into such mixed emotions on the issue.