

Meeting a tale of two projects

Gas station approved with little comment, while townhomes plan faces opposition

- LUKE WEIR
ROANOKE

With minimal opposition from the public, the Roanoke City Council approved a gas station to go with 768 apartments planned along Orange Avenue in the city's northeast.

Then, the city council went late into its Monday night meeting listening to residents of Medmont Circle oppose the addition of 24 housing units in their southwest neighborhood.

The council unanimously approved the addendum of a gas station to plans for 16 mid-rise apartment buildings on more than 50 acres off the intersection of Orange Avenue and Mecca Street. The council already had approved rezoning for the apartment complex in January 2023.

Previous city documents listed the apartments' developer as Lynchburg-based TPB Enterprises. A company called Orange Avenue Development is listed as the gas station developer, represented by Daniel Cyrus during the public hearing Monday night.

"This is a new retailer that we're proposing to bring to the city of Roanoke," Cyrus said. "We're currently under an NDA and can't disclose who it is at this point."

Two people spoke during the 10-minute public hearing, one in favor of and the other opposed to the gas station.

The apartments are planned to be built in two stages, and would constitute the largest housing development ever built in Roanoke. The land abuts residential neighborhoods in the Hollins-Wildwood area. Meanwhile, 16 people signed up to speak against rezoning 3.5 acres along the front stretch of Medmont Circle Southwest in the Greater Deyerle neighborhood.

Alexander Boone, of Roanoke-based ABoone Real Estate, is the developer. He said the plan is to build 20 first-floor primary bedroom suites targeting empty-nesters, alongside four town homes fronting Keagy Road, aimed at younger demographics.

"We're trying to create a community of different people, different ages," Boone said. "The development works with 24. It could have more, but really can't have less."

A Medmont resident since 1972, Karen Musgrove told the council to vote no on the proposed rezoning.

"Would you want 24 homes shoved into 3.5 acres on a hillside?" Musgrove said. "My guess is that you wouldn't want this in your neighborhood any more than we do."

Musgrove and other neighbors said they don't want people from the new development trespassing on their shared 3-acre lake. They expressed concerns about impacts to street parking availability, storm water runoff, delivery of emergency services and more.

"There will be many negative consequences if this passes tonight," Musgrove said. "Are we to call the Roanoke city police every time a child or adult trespasses?"

The council unanimously approved the rezoning, after an hourlong public hearing. It put council members in a tough spot, said Councilman Bev Fitzpatrick.

"This is a really difficult project for us to deal with," Fitzpatrick said. "Because of you and your sincere feelings about your neighborhood, and the length of time many of you have been there."

But the city's tax base is eroding, Fitzpatrick said.

Only "very well-placed developments by good developers" will prevent taxes from rising for everyone else, he said.

Councilwoman Stephanie Moon Reynolds said she looked thoroughly at both sides.

"It's been overwhelming for me," Moon Reynolds said. "It has just worn me down."

Councilwoman Trish White-Boyd and all the other council members said they went and viewed the area in question, to see for themselves what the outpouring of opposition was about.

"We have to do a better job with our communication," White-Boyd said. "Nobody is going to be pleased with a project they don't understand."

She said city staff and the development firm could have done better to answer neighbors' questions. Moon Reynolds said city staff could have communicated better.

Similarly, Vice Mayor Joe Cobb said Boone and city staff need to "over-communicate," as the development heads toward the project phase.

"The more we communicate, the more we can answer questions," Cobb said. "I don't want to get three months down the road and hear that neighbors haven't felt like they've been communicated with."

Mayor Sherman Lea said he disagreed with other council members' thoughts about city planning staff.

"I don't want to leave here tonight with people thinking our planning department is not doing what they have to do," Sherman said. "I recognize your care and love for your communities, but we have to make these tough decisions."

Councilman Peter Volosin said expanding the availability of housing is part of the city's long-term plan. In addition, city officials previously said there is a housing shortage in Roanoke.

"I do think that this is a relatively good development," Volosin said. "I look forward to welcoming those new residents into the community."

Councilwoman Vivian Sanchez-Jones was absent from Monday's city council meetings.

After hearing from a contingency of citizens who are advocating for Roanoke to pass a ceasefire resolution regarding the conflict overseas in Gaza, the council adjourned at 10:15 p.m.

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