

Barriers to new housing in Roanoke are sometimes unexpected

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Unavoidable and sometimes unexpected obstacles must be overcome if Roanoke is to increase availability of housing. Sometimes, a developer might find their bulldozer hauler stuck between a rock and a parking space. It was a bad case of the Mondays for construction workers trying to get up Oak Crest Avenue this week in southwest Roanoke. Site preparation began on 9.1 acres of an overgrown apple orchard at the county line. "It's been a little bit challenging, but everything is good," said developer Husain Alam on Friday. "Everybody's been cooperative the last day or so, which is nice."

Alam Design Group plans a 36-house subdivision, to go beside 25 homes already down the street in the Grandin Court neighborhood. For now, Oak Crest dead-ends at a driveway in Roanoke County, but plans call for a cul-de-sac lined with houses.

Beyond Oak Crest, these planned single-family homes should help alleviate an estimated 4,000-unit housing shortage in Roanoke. City officials visited neighborhood libraries last week, providing further outreach about a controversial set of zoning amendments designed to help as well. Construction crews could not progress very far down Oak Crest come Monday morning. Cars parked on both sides of the 25-foot-wide street did not leave much space for the heavy equipment to squeeze past. "There were a few neighbors that were parking at the throat of the street, so the big construction trailers could not turn and get into the neighborhood," Alam said. "Essentially a way of picketing or blocking." Oak Crest resident Monica Holbrook said people park along the public road all the time. She was one of the residents who met with Alam at a nearby church on the week before construction started. "They wanted to have our street commit to parking on one side of the road," Holbrook said. "Whether cars are parked there or not, it's an incredibly tight turn."

Instead on Monday, the developers unloaded their bulldozer at the front of the neighborhood and weaved it between the neighborhood cars. Holbrook said a construction worker cursed at her while she filmed on her cellphone. "I'm not against development. I know it needs to happen," Holbrook said. "I just want it to happen in a safe way. My biggest concern is the safety of our road." Kathy Gregory walked the street outside her house Tuesday morning, pointing down to where Oak Crest ends at a sharp turn onto Ashby Street Southwest.

"See, my car is the white one at the very end. I'm in the key spot for being hit," Gregory said. "I grew up in the '60s. I'm used to protesting." There's also a big white rock — perhaps a small boulder — placed at the edge of the lawn on Oak Crest's corner lot. It's large enough to prevent incoming vehicles from cutting the curb. Holbrook said the neighbor's rock hadn't been there for very long. By Wednesday, the neighbors and developer said they reached an agreement to park on the south side of Oak Crest during the daytime. "We've come up with a compromise for the next month," Holbrook said. "We're trying to work with them some."

Alam said his firm has built hundreds of homes. It's expected for people to get anxious about development happening close to their house, he said during a phone call. "I can understand the emotions," Alam said. "But you know, it's something that's duly approved. A by-right subdivision."

Rocks and parked cars are physical barriers that a housing developer could face. In addition to the hurdle of public opinion, city policies and politics also shape the housing landscape. Those challenges all

converge into the ongoing saga of citywide zoning amendments. Acting Assistant City Manager Chris Chittum explained details of the proposed amendments to a small crowd of neighbors at Belmont Library in southeast on Thursday night.

[Filibuster slows, doesn't stop passage of omnibus Roanoke zoning reform](#)

[Public to get more time to learn about Roanoke's consequential zoning reform](#)

"We've got 43 square miles in the city, and we're never going to get any bigger," Chittum said. "We can't expand our boundaries. To grow, we've got to grow from within." Builders in Roanoke need the ability to create denser types of housing than just single-family units, Chittum said. There is demand citywide for duplexes, triplexes and small apartments, at all price points from luxury to affordable. The residential zoning amendments aim to more freely allow that broader variety of land uses, mixed in amid the predominance of single-family neighborhoods in Roanoke. "We're trying to increase the supply of housing in general," Chittum said. "It's scarcity of housing we're trying to deal with." The proposed zoning amendments moderate the maximum number of housing units allowed on a property in proportion to the lot's total square-footage. At most under the new zoning, a large corner lot could house eight units, but most lots are too small for that kind of density, Chittum said. "We need developers to take the crappy weed lot that we always have to go out and mow, and put a house on it," Chittum said. "The biggest incentive you can give a developer is the ability to put a duplex in." For months, Chittum and city planners have explained these amendments to neighborhoods across the city, even after the city council initially approved materially similar zoning changes in March. Resistance to the changes arose early from some residents, leading to a lawsuit filed by people living in southwest Roanoke seeking the amendments' repeal.

[Residents sue to repeal Roanoke zoning overhaul](#)

[Roanoke City Council faces second zoning-related lawsuit](#)

Rather than engage in a prolonged legal challenge, the city council decided in June to send its zoning amendments back through the public hearing process for a few more months. But that process was further complicated earlier in August, when the city's planning board flipped and this time voted 3-2 against sending a favorable recommendation to the city council.

[Attendance contributed to Roanoke Planning Commission zoning flip](#)

[Roanoke's omnibus zoning changes: There can be 'divergence of interests'](#)

Even if the city council this time decides to vote down the zoning amendments after a public hearing Sept. 16, council members would still have to repeal the changes they approved in March, Chittum said. That would legally require mailing notices to every homeowner in the city, he said.

Ahead of the city council vote later in September, Councilwoman Stephanie Moon Reynolds said she thinks the zoning amendments still need work. She is running for mayor as a political independent. "To do it just citywide and anyplace by-right, I have issues with by-right on certain things," Moon Reynolds said. "Because you don't have any policies in place on the city to say, will you notify the public? Will you notify the neighborhood associations?" Oak Crest is an example of a project where residents might not have felt such grief if the developer had been required to provide more notice, even though the project is by-right construction that was approved under the old zoning codes, she said.

Former mayor David Bowers is running for mayor this year as a Republican. He said under the old zoning code, homeowners already had the right to divide single-family houses into denser housing, like duplexes. "But they have to go through a variance proceeding with the board of zoning appeals. By doing that, they have to give notice to their neighbors," Bowers said. "The neighbors can approve it or object, and if they object, the board of zoning appeals is likely to turn down the effort to chop up the residence." Bowers said zoning changes on a citywide scale are not the right move for Roanoke. He is one of the residents who is signed on to the lawsuit against the zoning amendments.

On the other hand, Vice Mayor Joe Cobb said he supports the zoning amendments. He is running for mayor as a Democrat. "We are stuck in terms of the ability to build new housing," Cobb said. "It's city council's role to help get out of the way and create reasonable, responsible solutions for more housing to be built in our city." He said some of the tension at Oak Crest could have been eased if developers had gone above the city's minimum requirements to notify only immediate neighbors.

All three mayoral candidates said there's more to do for housing, like dealing with poorly maintained houses. That task partly goes to the city's land bank, which can be used as a legal tool to recover blighted dwellings and return them to livable status. Moon Reynolds and Cobb said the city is working on inventorying vacant, blighted and code-infringing properties, which will help the land bank's operations. Bowers said such an inventory would be much-needed data.

[Roanoke land bank proving viable asset for affordable housing](#)

[Gas station approved for what will be Roanoke's largest apartment complex](#)

For city planners, the zoning changes are just one early action that can help alleviate housing pressures in Roanoke, Chittum said. The amendments can better enable other efforts by the city government to encourage housing, including the land bank. "If you provide other options, such as a duplex or triplex, or some other small level of density," Chittum said. "It will move some of these vacant lots and vacant houses and whatnot along, and get them moving into some productive use." Those changes might at least help city policies move out of the way for housing growth, even if developers could still find themselves dodging an occasional rock or some street traffic.

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