

Zoning issue reveals stark divide

Homeowners often at odds with young professionals, housing developers

While housing developers and young professionals voiced support for a set of zoning amendments that the Roanoke City Council approved Monday night, almost as many longtime homeowners expressed concerns about the sweeping changes.

For most people, zoning is often out of mind. But conversations on Monday – and spilling into a city council candidate forum on Tuesday – melded the topics of public opinion, politics, race, history and philosophy.

The council heard from 33 people over the course of an 80-minute public hearing on Monday. Council members spent some time responding to those comments, before taking a 6-1 vote to reaffirm the city council's decision from March.

At issue again was a set of zoning amendments that are partly intended to "remove barriers for the creation of affordable housing," by changing definitions and making other alterations to city code, according to city documents.

Opponents of the amendments said that removing Roanoke's predominantly single-family zoning will lead to unintended consequences. Supporters meanwhile said doing away with exclusionary zoning is a necessary step in encouraging the creation of more housing, and righting past wrongs.

Opinions from the crowded meeting room were well divided.

"Based on my calculation, it's kind of evenly split," said Councilwoman Stephanie Moon Reynolds, who cast the lone vote against the amendments. "The majority of the emails was against."

Often when one person spoke in support, the next person rose to voice an opposing perspective. Such was the case for the first two speakers: Isabel Thornton and Anthony Stavola.

Thornton is executive director at Restoration Housing, a nonprofit that renovates blighted properties around town. She was one of several housing developers who spoke in support.

"These amendments allow developers to create new housing in these spaces where lots and buildings will sit dormant otherwise," Thornton said. "We live in a city with countless available vacant lots or vacant buildings that deserve reinvestment, and those are the areas that will be positively impacted by these changes."

Stavola is a Raleigh Court homeowner who spearheaded the opposition. He is one of the people who brought forth a lawsuit after the city council initially adopted the zoning changes in March, causing the council to backtrack and reapprove the amendments rather than face a prolonged legal challenge.

"You have an opportunity to choose another path, because there are things that we all agree on," Stavola said, listing affordable housing, blighted and vacant lots. "It's time to move on from controversy and conflict to collaboration and compromise."

Homeowners such as Stavola were often the people who represented the opposing voice. Also speaking against the amendments were all three Republican candidates who are running for city council, including Nick Hagen.

"I have many, many concerns that these will act in a way which are counter to the exact reasoning for the zoning," Hagen said. "Things like redlining, things like our history with segregation, these are things I believe that are going to be exacerbated by this passage, because developers will likely look toward places which had been economically disadvantaged to develop."

Other voices in the room included young professionals expressing support for the zoning amendments.

Some people against the amendments said the changes could adversely affect property values, create parking scarcity, strain infrastructure, "and threaten the stability and character of our neighborhoods."

Some people who spoke in favor said Roanoke's single-family zoning is a vestigial policy from the days of racial segregation and redlining — historically discriminating by race in lending for home mortgages or for home insurance, a practice now against the law — and removing that policy represents "a step forward toward ending one small aspect of systemic racism in Roanoke."

The public comments left a lot for the council to discuss.

Moon Reynolds said she weighed the pros and cons. She would prefer to table the vote until a new city manager starts the job.

Politics was at play for the council on this vote, especially considering Moon Reynolds is running as an independent candidate for mayor, while Vice Mayor Joe Cobb is the Democratic candidate.

"I don't believe in ta-bling things. I don't believe in passing them off to the next council," Cobb said. "I don't buy this notion that the fear of seeing increased multi-family housing is going to ruin our neighborhoods."

Councilwoman Vivian Sanchez-Jones said despite what some people believe, Roanoke is a growing place.

"I understand that the zoning issue is a point of contention for some," Sanchez-Jones said. "But I firmly believe that the proposal is in the best interest of our city's future."

Councilman Peter Volosin said "the single most important reason for amending our zoning code is ending segregation."

"What started out as racially exclusive covenants and deed restrictions in the early 1900s has turned into en masse use of zoning laws to perpetuate segregation," Volosin said. "Single-family zoning was started in the early 1900s."

He said single-family zoning started as a legal way to keep people of color out of neighborhoods, because single-family houses are more expensive to build and own than other forms of housing.

Councilman Bev Fitzpatrick said it was a common-sense decision for him. Monday was his first vote on the zoning amendments, after he was appointed to the council to fill a vacancy in July.

"Most of all, I'm embarrassed. Because I spent 12 years-plus on this council, and I didn't realize that we had segregationist zoning, and I apologize because I never saw it that way," Fitzpatrick said. "I'm embarrassed to think that we have let this go as long and as far as it's gone."

Mayor Sherman Lea said the city has to keep moving forward.

"We've had some people say some things tonight that concern me," Lea said. "How this started initially ... what brought on this type of zoning — the redlining, all those kinds of terms — we've got to be bigger than that in Roanoke."

Zoning discussions spilled into a city council candidate forum hosted by the Greater Williamson Road Business Association on Tuesday. Republican council candidate Jim Garrett spoke against the amendments during the forum.

"I got so angry last night I couldn't hardly talk. We kind of got framed as racist, and I keep hearing all this stuff about redlining and racism," Garrett said. "I understand there was racism, but anybody can buy a house in Roanoke now."

David Bowers, the Republican candidate for mayor, said the zoning changes are "the worst decision that any city council has made in our city in 50 years."

"We had a better idea. Things were going well the way it is," Bowers said. "Under the new scheme, you don't have any right to say what your neighbor is going to do or not."

Cobb said the zoning changes are not going to eradicate single-family neighborhoods.

"This was not only about removing horrific segregation-based laws about single-family housing and redlining," Cobb said. "It was about creating more opportunities to increase housing inventory in our city."

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