

Planning commission votes against controversial Roanoke rezoning changes

The issue now goes to a vote by the city council, which isn't bound by the recommendation of the planning commission.

by [Samantha Verrelli](#) August 12, 2024

A group of homeowners suing the city held a press conference at Crafteria, just a few blocks from the municipal building. Photo by Samantha Verrelli.

The Roanoke Planning Commission voted 3-2 Monday against recommending the reapproval of a series of zoning amendments that were intended to ease the city's housing crunch but quickly became the subject of a lawsuit after they were approved this spring.

The city council will take up the issue at its Sept. 16 meeting, when a public hearing will be held. It is not bound by the planning commission's recommendation.

Planning commission members Kevin Berry, James Smith and Pamela Smith voted against the recommendation. Scott Terry-Cabbler and Frank Martin voted in support. Karri Atwood and Sarah Glenn were absent.

"It seems like the changes are trying to do something workforce development and economic development should be doing, and not us," James Smith said during the meeting. "I think there's some great things in here. But I think it's just too big, too broad a change. And I'm not sure it's going to yield the return on investment."

In March, [the planning commission voted 5-1 to recommend the original amendments](#) to the city council, which went on to approve them on a 5-2 vote. [The changes to the zoning code, which are currently in effect](#), increased the allowed building density in some residential areas, among other updates.

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During the one-hour public hearing Monday, 16 people addressed the planning commission. Some said they believe that more time is needed for better planning decisions to be made, and that the amendments are too "broad."

One speaker suggested supporting the reapproval but only allowing the zoning changes to apply to new construction. Alison Stone Blanton, a trustee with the Roanoke Valley Preservation Foundation, said she was concerned that the changes would lead to more demolitions in historic neighborhoods. Another speaker asked how the commission could guarantee that these changes would actually lead to affordable housing.

Pamela Smith said after the meeting that the concern about historic neighborhoods resonated with her. She's also concerned about affordability of potential new developments.

"I want us to build, we need to build," she said. "But I do feel like we do have to be more secure that the housing is going to be for the people who need the housing."

Developers Alexander Boone and Matt Prescott approached the commission with support for the reauthorization of the zoning amendments. Boone appeared before the council on July 15 with a proposal to rezone a portion of land in the Medmont neighborhood for a 24-unit development plan, which was approved.

“Housing stock in Roanoke is old. We need newer homes and we can’t grow as a city if we don’t have places to live,” Boone said. “When you look at the details, you realize it’s not as dramatic.”

The debate regarding the reauthorization of zoning code amendments began in June after a group of homeowners sued the city over the amendments, largely claiming the city did not follow legal procedure before approving the amendments on March 18.

Common concerns from residents since March regarding the zoning amendments themselves included questions about parking, stormwater drainage, crowding and access for emergency vehicles.

The proposal to reapprove the amendments yielded substantially the same amendments from March, with a few minor tweaks.



Anthony Stavola, a plaintiff in a suit against the city, addressed residents at a press conference Monday. Photo by Samantha Verrelli.

Right before the public hearing, lawsuit plaintiffs held a press conference several blocks away, at Crafteria. Anthony Stavola fielded questions from residents, other plaintiffs and city council candidates

up for election in November. Stephanie Moon Reynolds was the only current council member in attendance.

Stavola said there's "no question" of the housing affordability crisis that Roanoke is facing. He's just not convinced that the zoning code changes will fix that. He proposed looking at developing vacant lots, as well as existing "dilapidated" housing that's currently unused.

"The adopted amendments also ignore a very important fact," Stavola said, "which is that many of our neighborhoods already have what the city says we need, which is mixed housing."

Reached by phone after the planning commission meeting, Stavola said he was "pleasantly surprised" that the commission had voted against the recommendation.

"We interpret it as a hopeful sign that the message that it needs some more work done on it is getting through, and we hope to see the council acknowledge that," he said.

Chris Chittum, acting assistant city manager, said after the meeting that he was "disappointed" that the planning commission hadn't recommended the proposal.

Two community meetings will be held before the proposal goes to the council on Sept. 16, Chittum said:

- 6 p.m. Aug. 27, 6 p.m., Melrose Library
- 6 p.m. Aug. 29, Belmont Library