



A graphic shows findings from a 2022 citywide housing study in Roanoke. People are considered cost burdened if their housing expenses – such as rent and utilities – exceeds 30% of their income.

Screencap from City of Roanoke

Luke Weir

Zoning changes proposed for Roanoke neighborhoods will gradually enable more variety and availability of precious housing, city officials believe.

Planners are going on tour to local library branches throughout February, starting in Belmont on Wednesday (Feb. 7) to explain what the changes mean, said Chris Chittum, the city's executive director of community development and placemaking.

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"It is those regulatory barriers that increase the cost of housing," Papa Moore said. "Making it more expensive to build."

Zoning also intersects with several issues, including quality of life, economy and inequality, she said. Code changes won't cause results overnight, but with time.

"This is going to be a slow burn," Papa Moore said. "But if we're brave enough to do this work, this will affect generations to come."

In a city lacking at least 4,000 housing units, the city is trying to create an environment that encourages private sector builders to respond to the need, said City Manager Bob Cowell.

"We don't produce the housing," Cowell said. "What we can do as a city ... is adopt policy that sets the stage for more production of housing."

The zoning changes also put Roanoke in best compliance with federal fair housing laws, said City Attorney Tim Spencer.

If the zoning changes are approved by city council as early as March, new housing will still fit within the context of existing neighborhoods, said Zoning Administrator Phillip Moore. The changes seek a balance between reducing regulatory red tape and preventing sore thumb buildings, he said.

cottages and courtyard apartments.

There are definition changes, simplifications and other technical alterations to the city's zoning codes, all as part of the reform efforts.

At this point, it's less important who new housing is built for, Chittum said. Roanoke needs a bit of everything.

"People are just gobbling up whatever housing is out there," Chittum said. "Because it's so scare."

The result is a housing mismatch, he said.

"People with high incomes are living in lower-income housing," Chittum said. "Even creating new housing units that are \$1,500 or \$2,000 a month will help our housing market throughout all tiers of income."

A citywide study in 2022 found that almost half of renters in Roanoke are paying more than 30% of their income on housing costs, meaning they are cost burdened. At the same time, more than one in four homeowners were cost burdened.

Elsewhere in Virginia, Arlington and Charlottesville recently adopted similar zoning changes, Chittum said. Roanoke is leading Southwest Virginia, but "every locality ought to be doing this at some point," he said.

Meanwhile, in Alexandria, a civic group has sued the city over new zoning changes. City officials had cast the initiative as an effort to lower costs by adding more housing, but the plaintiffs – including the Coalition for a Livable Alexandria and nine homeowners – allege in the lawsuit that the city failed to show how ending single-family zoning would result in less expensive housing options or boost diversity in some neighborhoods, according to The Washington Post.

In Roanoke, the reforms currently going through the approval process are part of a series of zoning changes taking place since the adoption of a new long-term city plan in 2020.

“Time is of the essence when we have a 4,000-unit housing shortage,” Volosin said. “I’m hopeful that we’ll be able to move this forward in March.”

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Zoning amendment open house meetings

Roanoke is changing its zoning codes to enable more housing. Learn more at one of the below meetings, all happening from 4 p.m. to 6 p.m.

Belmont Library Branch

Wednesday, Feb. 7

1101 Morningside St SE

Melrose Library Branch

Thursday, Feb. 8

2502 Melrose Ave NW, Suite D

Gainsboro Branch Library

Thursday, Feb. 15

15 Patton Ave NW

Main Library Branch

Wednesday, Feb. 21

706 S Jefferson St

Williamson Library Branch

Wednesday, Feb. 28

3837 Williamson Road NW

6/20/24, 2:28 PM Tuesday, Feb. 13

Zoning changes aim to encourage more housing in Roanoke

6 p.m. to 7 p.m.

Location: Zoom

Call in: 1(646)-931-3860, Zoom ID: 864 3655 5523

By Luke Weir
