

Appointee to Roanoke City Council To Determine Fate of Single-Family Zoning Reforms

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Former councilwoman Trish White-Boyd, former city treasurer Evelyn Powers and Rabbi Kathy Cohen are the three finalists Council members will interview publicly Monday. Eleven people applied for the post, which became vacant after Cobb was elected mayor.

Behind the scenes, the fate of reforms that ended exclusively single-family zoning is at least one political hot potato at play.

Roanoke [in September adopted new policies](#) that made it easier to build multi-family housing throughout the city's residential neighborhoods. City planners say the reforms will spur needed housing development and reduce racial and economic inequities. But the reforms prompted [lawsuits from homeowners](#) and became a [flashpoint in the November municipal elections](#).

Now, whoever is appointed to Council will be the deciding vote in whether those reforms are tweaked or kept as is.

Three members — Cobb, Councilman Peter Volosin and Councilwoman Vivian Sanchez-Jones — voted for the reforms, while the three newly elected members — Vice Mayor Terry McGuire, Councilman Phazhon Nash and Councilman Nick Hagen — have said they want to see changes or an outright repeal.

White-Boyd, who opted not to run for reelection last year, voted for the policy. Powers, who lost a seat on Council by coming in fourth, said she would vote to repeal the law.

Cohen, in a text message Tuesday, said the policies are just one way to address a major housing shortage.

"I understand that there are many who are opposed to this reform and I appreciate their position," Cohen said. "That being said, I do not think that it should be brought back to the table. There are too many issues that the Council needs to address and we need to move forward."

In an email, Cobb said he is hopeful Council will make its appointment Monday, but that the decision would "be determined by the information received during the interviews and our discernment following." Cobb was away on a silent retreat and answered questions by email.

"We are facing numerous important issues in our city including the creation of a range of housing affordability options, continued economic and business growth, and educational expansion," Cobb said when asked if the city's zoning reforms would factor in his decision. "I am most interested in appointing a Council member who is forward thinking with the best interests of our city as a whole in mind."

Plaintiffs in the lawsuit against the city have lobbied Council members to appoint Powers, who ran for Council as an independent. Powers won five terms as the city's elected treasurer as a Democrat before she retired in September.

Anthony Stavola, who is among the homeowners suing the city, last week urged Council members to pick Powers because she garnered about 13,000 votes in the November election.

"If in fact the fourth seat had been vacant at the time of the election, she would be sitting up there," he said.

More lobbying has gone into returning White-Boyd to the dais.

Former Mayor Sherman Lea and former Council members Anita Price and Djuna Osborne were among a dozen residents advocating on White-Boyd's behalf, saying she would bring experience and institutional knowledge.

"Trish has the experience, background, relationships, respect and passion to serve our city once again during this transitional time of our local city government," Price said. "Now I call this Council transitional, as we have just welcomed our new city manager, and there are three newly elected Council members. Having that prior knowledge and experience that Trish represents provides that sense of stability."

Price noted that in recent Council appointments, the body turned to a former member. [Council tapped Bev Fitzpatrick](#), who last served in 2008, to fill the unexpired term of Luke Priddy, [who resigned last year for a job in Northern Virginia](#).

Priddy had won a special election to succeed Price, [who herself was picked to fill a nine-month term of Robert Jeffrey Jr.](#) Jeffrey was [convicted in 2022 on embezzlement and fraud charges](#).

Supporters of Powers, meanwhile, point to how White-Boyd was appointed to Council in 2019 after Council member John Garland resigned. He recommended White-Boyd, who came fourth place in the 2016 municipal election. Backers of Powers have also highlighted how some prominent Democrats — including Lea, Volosin and White-Boyd — [endorsed Powers for the Council seat over Democratic nominee Benjamin Woods](#), who placed sixth.

Cohen, in her statement of interest, said she "gave serious thought to running during this last election" but her rabbinical duties conflicted with launching a campaign.

During the campaign, some candidates made clear they would back the fourth-highest vote getter for a vacancy if Cobb became mayor.

"During the campaign trail, I was on the side of the fourth person, of who should get that seat," Nash said last week. "That's what I said at forums, and that's what I'll stick to."