

## **Attendance contributed to zoning flip**

Commission voted Monday against recommending similar proposals back to city council

LUKE WEIR, THE ROANOKE TIMES

ROANOKE PLANNING COMMISSION

Attendance contributed to the outcome when the Roanoke Planning Commission voted for a second time Monday with different results on proposed citywide zoning amendments.

Unlike its 5-1 vote favoring the amendments in March, the seven-member commission on Monday voted 3-2 against recommending similar proposals back to the city council.

The amendments alter definitions in the zoning code and attempt to do away with a predominance of residential land restricted to single-family housing, which city planners have said limits the creation of other, more affordable styles of dwelling, such as duplexes.

It's been a contentious issue. The city council already approved the zoning amendments in March, but opted to reconsider after citizens filed a lawsuit seeking their repeal.

One of the two commission members who was absent on Monday said she might have voted yes to the proposed zoning amendments. Commissioner Sarah Glenn voted yes during the first vote in March, and said in an email Tuesday she would've been inclined to do so again.

"It is difficult to say with certainty since I did not hear the public comment yesterday," Glenn said in the email. "But my inclination heading into the meeting was to vote yes."

She wrote that Roanoke has a deficit of housing for people in all phases of life and across the income spectrum. Reducing barriers in the city's zoning code won't fix the problem outright, but it's a necessary step to address a serious issue, she said.

"Roanoke's zoning should be modernized in order to support diverse housing opportunities for new and existing residents," Glenn said. "This is clearly laid out as a priority in our Comprehensive Plan."

Glenn said she is out of town because of an unexpected family matter.

"I could debate some of the finer details of the changes," Glenn said. "But on balance, I think it is an improvement and will result in much more good than harm."

The other commissioner who was absent Monday, Karri Atwood, answered a phone call after the meeting to say she was overseas, but she declined to answer how she might have voted on the amendments. She voted yes during the commission's initial vote in March.

Atwood was present at six out of 10 commission meetings held during the 2024 fiscal year that ended June 30, according to an annual report available on a city webpage. Glenn was present at seven of the meetings, while the other five commissioners were all present for at least eight meetings.

Atwood, whose online resume says she has been on the commission since 2017, was present during the commission's first meeting of the fiscal year in July. On that same resume, it says she started as executive director of a social welfare organization called VIRGINIAFOREVER in December 2023.

The group advocates "for increased funding for water quality improvements and land conservation across the Commonwealth," and is based in Richmond.

Atwood on Tuesday did not immediately respond to an email requesting comment about how she might have voted on the amendments, her attendance rate at commission meetings, or her status as a Roanoke resident.

Commissioner Pamela Smith, who voted no to the amendments Monday, was absent from the initial vote in March.

One other factor that contributed to the commission's flip on zoning amendments was the vote from commissioner Kevin Berry. He voted in favor of the amendments in March, but voted against them on Monday.

In an email on Tuesday, Berry said it was "a very hard vote."

"I feared that a wide-ranging resolution such as this would potentially create conflict between neighbors; one who can make major changes by right, and others who have little recourse," Berry said. "That concern outweighed the potential benefit of the estimated 40 units per year created through this resolution."

Berry said he took careful consideration of both sides. The city needs to create housing, have walkable communities, and be a friendly environment for commerce, he wrote.

"I believe that we need to continue to have discussions on how to diversify housing," Berry said. "How to create livable communities, and how to grow as one city."

The city council will still vote on and hold another public hearing regarding the proposed zoning amendments on Sept. 17. This time, however, the changes won't have a favorable recommendation from the commission.

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