

Roanoke residents ditch lawsuits, talk single-family zoning with city council

Roanoke Times, Luke Weir, August 20, 2025

Groups of Roanoke residents on Tuesday said they are refocusing their efforts to instead work with the city council rather than suing to repeal a series of zoning changes made last year.

Citywide residential zoning reforms stirred controversy among some citizens, although planners said the changes will help alleviate a widespread housing shortage.

Two groups of neighbors were concerned enough to file suit, seeking total repeal of the highly technical amendments.

One of those citizens, Anthony Stavola, said he met with city councilmen Nick Hagen and Peter Volosin at city hall on Tuesday afternoon. The three discussed initial steps toward amending parts of the new zoning code that concerned Stavola and other neighbors, he said.

“The core issues were density, accommodations for parking, lot size requirements, corner lot development density,” Stavola said. “Community input, and a requirement for approval on projects that are higher-level in terms of density or require destruction of pre-existing buildings.”

Regarding the lawsuit, Stavola said a court hearing scheduled for Thursday will not occur. The case is “essentially being deactivated,” Stavola said.

“The legal actions just spoke to the intensity of people’s feelings about this,” Stavola said. “That’s how strong their concerns were.”

Lawyers for another group of citizens, this one led by Kristin Segelke, sent a press statement to The Roanoke Times on Tuesday morning. It said Segelke and others will “refocus their efforts on working with the new city council.”

“There were serious flaws in the City’s enactment of comprehensive zoning amendments eliminating single-family zoning districts,” the statement from John Fishwick said. “A majority of the City Council now appear to share their concerns and have expressed commitment to revisiting the zoning amendments.”

Stavola said his discussions with Volosin and Hagen on Tuesday were “incredibly positive, productive.”

“For a first step, it was very positive,” Stavola said. “Much more positive than anything I’ve had in the past year and a half.”

So what prompted the change in tone between residents and council members? One answer is the election last November, which brought four new members to the city council, Stavola said.

“The new council people had been through a campaign and heard a lot about this,” Stavola said. “They didn’t have the ownership that the pre-existing council people did.”

But also, the residents who sued to repeal have realized there may be some worthwhile aspects of the zoning changes, he said. Roanoke’s housing shortage has contributed to higher property taxes and raising rent prices.

“Being able to say there are good things here ... A full repeal is not necessarily what has to happen,” Stavola said. “There are ways to accommodate your concerns without having to junk the whole thing.”

So that’s the direction this longstanding dispute is heading: Toward a compromise.

“If, for some reason, all the wheels fall off, another lawsuit can be started,” Stavola said. “But I don’t really anticipate that’s going to be the outcome.”

In a text message, Hagen said he and Volosin have begun discussions with citizens about developing amendments to the zoning changes.

“We look forward to hearing more from the public,” Hagen said. “And announcing our public input plan in the near future.”

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