

CASEY: Where is Roanoke's controversial multi-family zoning law heading?

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Thursday morning I stepped outside my front door and measured the width of Tillett Road in the Grandin Court neighborhood. The tape measure extended to 20 feet — but the street is wider — so the operation was imprecise.

But if I reckoned correctly, the width was 24 feet, perhaps a handful of inches less.

Longview Avenue in South Roanoke, a two-way street with lots of multi-family housing, is one of Roanoke's many residential roads that's often jammed with parked cars on both sides, effectively turning Longview Avenue into a one-way street.

That means when cars are parked across Tillett from each other, there's barely enough room for a normal-sized vehicle to squeeze between. And I doubt a fire engine could get through that narrow gap.

Even at spots where only one car is parked, two-way traffic can become an exercise in dodging the oncoming vehicle.

Tillett is hardly the only residential Roanoke street that narrow. And that's just one reason why the Roanoke City Council's decision last year to eliminate single-family zoning was a bad move.

Under the change, single-family residences can be redeveloped into duplexes, triplexes etc., by owner right and without public notice or input. (The 2024 law cut minimum lot sizes, too.)

Sixth Street Southwest, near the Jefferson Center, is in a multi-family neighborhood that also includes business and institutional users. When cars are parked on both sides of the street, only one direction of traffic can get through.

Previously, such redevelopments required permission from city hall. They required public notice and afforded public input.

If it works as intended, the change will increase housing density in Roanoke's residential neighborhoods. In theory, that could help make housing more affordable, or at least less unaffordable. It also means more dwelling units per block, on average, and more cars, and more on-street parking — which will tie up traffic on narrow roads like Tillett.

The council first enacted the zoning changes by a vote of 5-2 in March 2024, but later repealed them after questions arose about public-notice provisions. The council reenacted the changes again in September by a 6-1 vote.

The March 2024 ordinance prompted both an outcry and a lawsuit by 15 residents, including former Roanoke mayor David Bowers and former Roanoke city attorney Bill Hackworth. The September ordinance prompted yet another lawsuit, filed in October, by additional Roanoke residents.

Marshall Avenue near 10th Street in the Old Southwest neighborhood. This shot was taken in the middle of a weekday; on weekends and evenings just about every parking space on each side is full and sections of Marshall effectively become one-way.

Those lawsuits remain active. In total, the plaintiffs now number 20. Representing them in both cases is John Fishwick, the former U.S. attorney. The cases will probably be combined, if they get to trial.

That's looking increasingly unlikely, because four members of the current seven-member Roanoke City Council have expressed serious misgivings about the law. Three were elected in November and the fourth was subsequently appointed.

"We are hopeful that the four new city council members, all of whom are on the record during the recent campaign as supporting repeal of the new zoning law, will keep their promise and now do so," Bowers said.

Running against the zoning change, Bowers came close to winning a fifth term as mayor last November. (Then-Vice Mayor Joe Cobb, who voted for the 2024 law twice, won the three-way mayor's race narrowly. Cobb didn't return a phone call Friday by deadline.)

"Our preference is a meaningful process of engagement, not just with city council, but to better understand what the concerns are and address them," said Tony Stavola, a Raleigh Court resident and lead plaintiff in the first lawsuit.

Stavola scoffed that the new law has already enabled a proposal for a 36-unit apartment building on Richelieu Avenue in south Roanoke, where four century-old houses now stand. Under the old law, a development of that magnitude would require a public hearing. Under the new law, it's not required.

"They're knocking down affordable housing units and replacing them with market-value housing," Stavola added. "Just giving the developer, by right, the power to change the housing mix is depriving neighbors, residents and citizens of the ability to weigh in."

Vice Mayor Terry McGuire, elected in November, is one of the skeptics of the 2024 law, though he said he doesn't necessarily hate everything about it.

“My position has always been I would not have voted for the package of zoning amendments and I would like to see some changes,” McGuire said. “We have to be more creative with how we develop — I’m very pro-developer.”

But McGuire wasn’t pleased the 2024 law enabled the south Roanoke proposal for “30-some luxury apartments. That totally defies the intent of the zoning amendments,” he added.

“I’m hoping to see it repealed,” said Councilman Nick Hagen, elected as a Republican in November. Hagen said the council could add amendments to the law that fundamentally undercut some of the changes adopted in 2024, without scrapping the whole thing.

For example, one could require redevelopers of single family homes to include a minimum number of off-street parking spaces for each dwelling unit added in a residential neighborhood. That would help keep parked cars off narrow streets, he said.

A third council candidate who expressed unease with the zoning change last year is Phazhon Nash, a Democrat. Nash was out of town Friday but sent a text.

“As we have conversations about the future of zoning, I want to make sure we’re prioritizing protections against gentrification and displacement,” he wrote. “It’s also important to me that any new development includes a mix of rental and homeownership opportunities, not just rental units.”

The final council member who favors repeal is Councilwoman Evelyn Powers, the longtime former Roanoke treasurer.

As an independent, she ran fourth for three open council seats in November. Powers was appointed this year to fill Cobb’s former council seat, which became vacant when Cobb became mayor.

We talked Thursday night after a community budget meeting, where the zoning change wasn’t publicly discussed. She said she believes the council will take up the matter after it sets the city’s 2025-26 budget. That takes effect July 1.

Regarding the zoning law, “We need to sit down and redo the whole damn thing,” Powers said. “I don’t like seeing taxpayers filing lawsuits. Those cost money, too.”

Anthony Stavola, left, and Roanoke City Attorney Tim Spencer discuss zoning amendments during a recess at the city council meeting on April 7. Stavola is one of a group of citizens suing to overturn amendments the city council passed in March.

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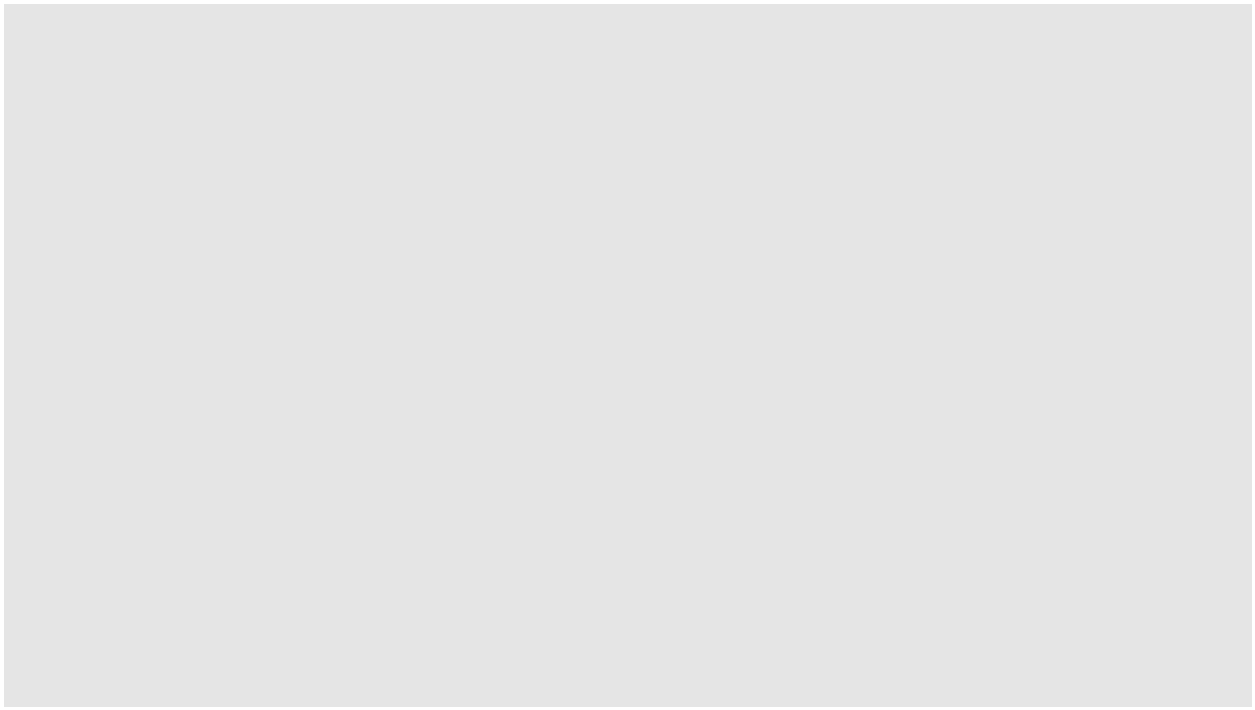


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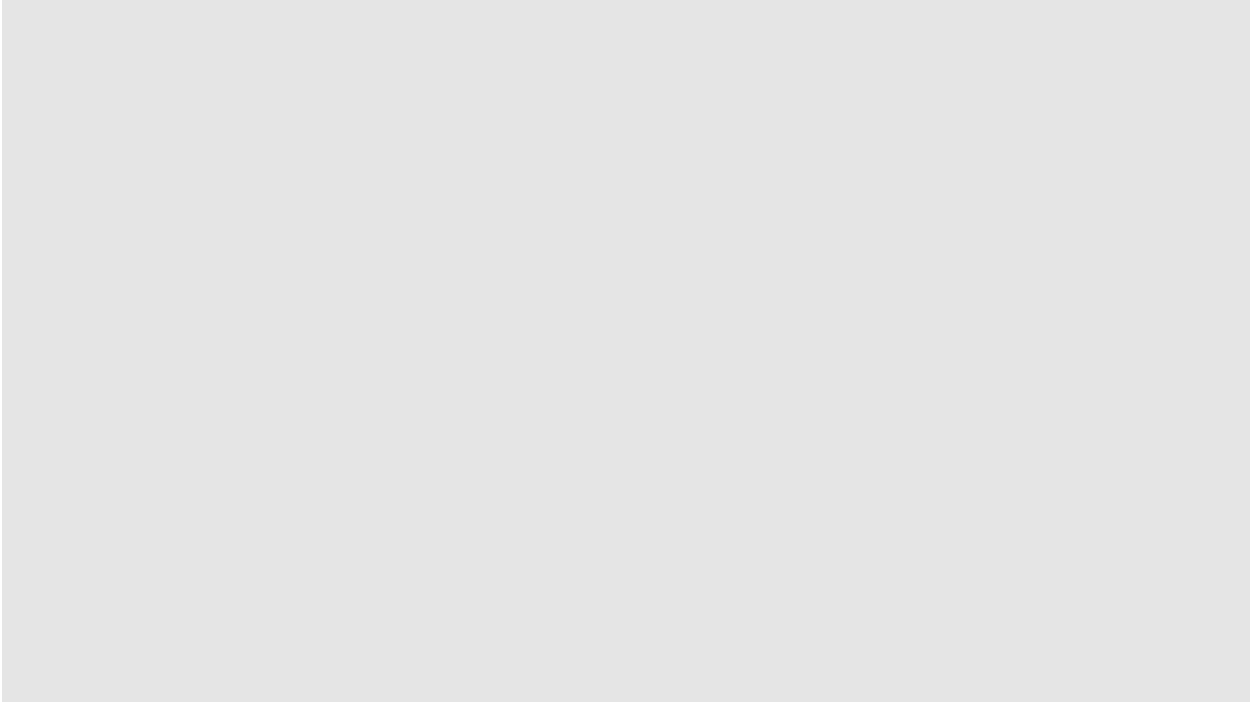
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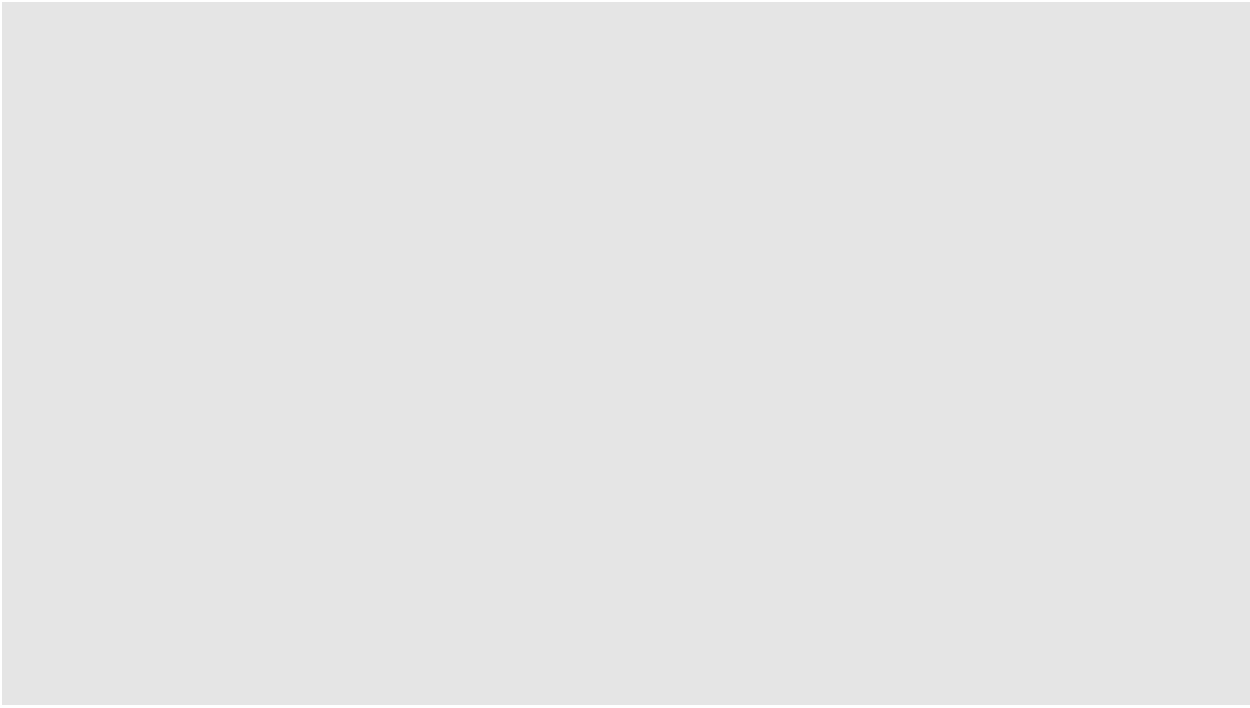
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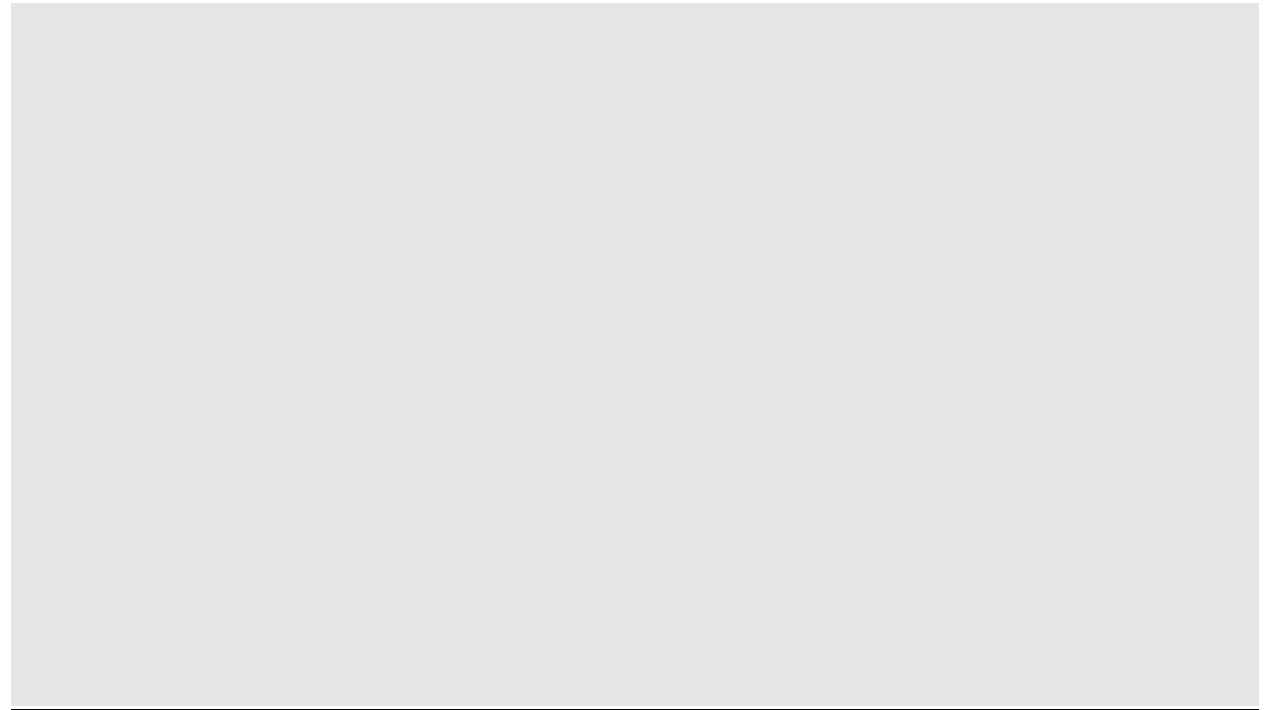
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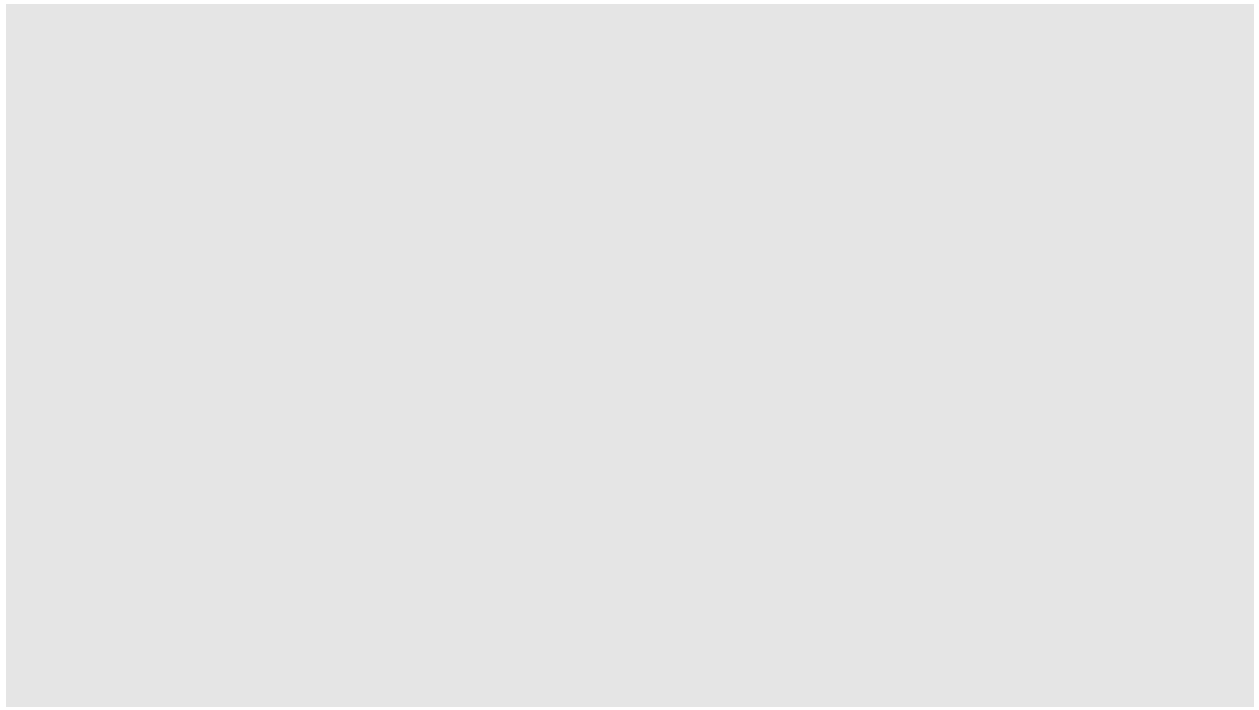
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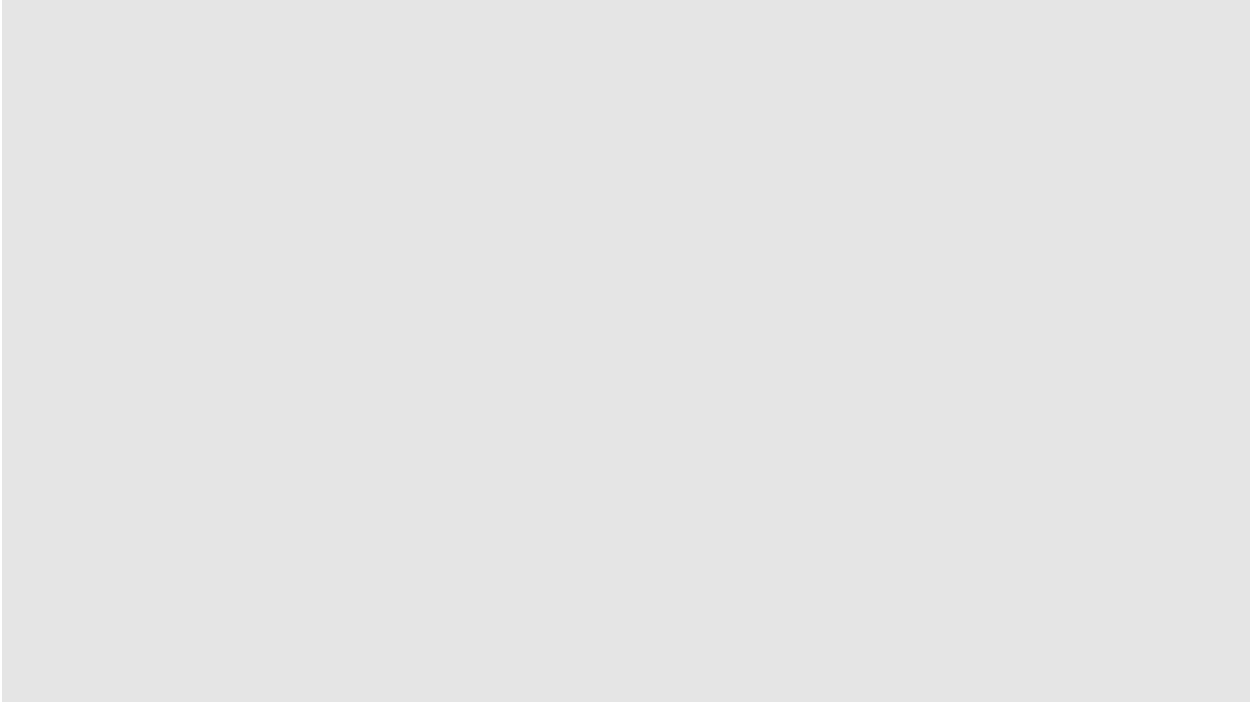
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