

Roanoke councilmembers agree to amend single-family zoning reforms

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Roanoke City Council members this week resolved to take a third look at residential zoning reforms that have stirred disagreement among the council and city residents since last year.

Following terse discussions, councilmen Nick Hagen and Peter Volosin agreed they would work together to draft amendments that give more opportunity for public input when new construction comes to neighborhoods.

Mayor Joe Cobb said he thinks that's the main rub in this conflict. It had been broiling for longer than 18 months by the time of Monday afternoon's city council meeting.

"What I'm hearing more than anything ... is a desire to find a way to enhance the public input process, the public notification process," Cobb said. "What's been missing is an opportunity to discuss like we're discussing now how passionately we feel about this."

Hagen is one of four city council members who were elected last year. He and fellow newcomers to the council — Terry McGuire, Phazhon Nash and Evelyn Powers — each ran campaigns promising to repeal or amend a set of zoning changes enacted in March 2024.

Those wide-ranging, technical changes allow for easier creation of duplexes, small-scale apartments and other forms of "missing middle" housing, an absence of which contributes to the city's ongoing housing shortage, planning staff say.

However, some residents are concerned that the changes remove neighborhood voices when new construction comes to streets that were previously zoned exclusively for single-family houses. Two groups of citizens have filed lawsuits seeking repeal.

"One of the largest concerns that I've had about this is the lack of public input when these changes occur in neighborhoods," Hagen said. "I'd like to know what it looks like if we do go about the repeal, both from a legal side as well as zoning and tax implications thereof."

Hagen filed a document proposing city staff to study effects of repealing the zoning reforms. Volosin, who was on the council that twice approved the zoning changes last year, said the proposal was overly vague.

"This is a very, I would say, lazy attempt to get a political issue dealt with," Volosin said. "Just saying, 'Hey, go study this,' is kind of a giant task for our government to take on."

Volosin said he favors amending the zoning changes, but city staff need to be provided more detailed directions. The zoning reforms included 60 pages of code changes, he said.

“Our job is to create policy,” Volosin said. “You’re pawning off your job as a politician to come up with these policies, and trying to put them onto a planning department that has already studied this and has already done what they believe is the best thing to do.”

Staff’s guidance is the zoning code as it exists, City Manager Valmarie Turner said. The council needs to provide more guidance on what to change, she said.

“If you have some specific ideas of what you would like for us to look at, then we can do that,” Turner said. “If it needs to be repealed ... that’s something that council will need to do.”

More than 100 different code sections changed, contributing to the confusion among citizens, Councilwoman Evelyn Powers said. She said citizens should not have to file lawsuits against the city.

“We have a lot of issues that people need to really sit down and talk about it,” Powers said. “We need to be professionals at this dais and figure out what makes our citizens happy.”

Volosin said the technicality of the changes is why the city relies on a planning department.

Planning Director Jillian Papa said more than 11,000 new users visited the planroanoke.org/zoning webpage during public outreach last year.

“It’s been a concern and a point of conflict in the community, but I appreciate the dialog,” Papa said. “With all the public comments that we received, we do answer those ... We didn’t always end up with agreement, but we did listen and respond.”

The community dialogue continued during Monday’s city council meeting. A total of 14 residents addressed the council during its citizen comment period.

“Ensuring affordable and accessible housing options are available in all neighborhoods ... That is a Roanoke I want to live in,” Eric Robinson said. “We cannot go backward on these issues.”

For each supporter, two or three people spoke in opposition. They had concerns about property values, parking and over-development.

“There goes the neighborhood. Your single-family homes and quiet neighborhoods are threatened,” David Bowers said. “I ask you to repeal the new rezoning law.”

A majority of the city council would like to see changes to the zoning reforms, Vice Mayor Terry McGuire said. But the council is just as split in opinion as the residents who elected them.

“I don’t hear a consensus on either side,” McGuire said. “I think there we run the gamut on council.”

Whatever comes out of this, it could all change within two years, Councilman Phazhon Nash said.

“It’s important for us not to die on a hill but to work collaboratively with citizens,” Nash said. “What are the hard noes? Let’s clear up gray area and make sure that we keep that in the forefront of our minds as we move forward.”

Cobb said there might not be an appetite to appeal the zoning overhaul, but there is consensus to amend. He assigned Hagen and Volosin to work together on finding specific points of code to amend.

“I happily accept,” Hagen said.

The city council will workshop the issue sometime in October, Cobb said.

“The other rub is that I think we have some people in some of our neighborhoods who just do not want change ... They want to preserve what was,” Cobb said. “We cannot address our housing crisis if we solely preserve single-family neighborhoods. That’s why having a citywide zoning reform was so important.”