

Roanoke Once Again Ends Single-Family-Only Zoning After Lawsuit Prompted a Do-Over

[Henri Gendreau](#), Sep 17, 2024

City Council made the “redo” after a lawsuit from homeowners challenged how the city gave public notice about the proposal.

Roanoke has ended exclusively single-family zoning — period.

City Council on Monday voted 6-1 to readopt essentially [the same package of zoning reforms approved in March](#) that make it easier to build duplexes, triplexes and small apartment buildings throughout Roanoke’s residential neighborhoods.

Council made the “redo” [after a lawsuit from homeowners challenged how the city gave public notice about the proposal](#). City officials said it would be [easier to vote on the issue again rather than argue in court that the first vote was proper](#).

City planners say the elimination of single-family-only zoning will reduce racial and economic inequities while also increasing Roanoke’s housing stock by encouraging more development.

“We’ve got to think forward,” Mayor Sherman Lea said. “I don’t want Roanoke to go back.”

The mayor, nodding to colleagues’ description of single-family zoning’s segregationist history, noted, “I grew up in that environment.”

The issue has galvanized residents and [become a campaign issue in this fall’s municipal elections](#). On Monday night, 17 residents spoke in support of the zoning changes, with 16 residents in opposition.

For the most part, local developers, young professionals and housing advocates spoke in favor of the reforms. Mostly older homeowners and local Republican candidates spoke against the reforms.

In an odd twist, the outcome of Monday’s vote would have been the same regardless of how Council voted. The city made clear that the reforms approved in March have remained in effect, so the update merely served to tweak the proposal.

In another hiccup, the city’s planning commission, which had previously approved the reforms, reversed itself last month, [recommending that Council not approve the latest version](#).

Robert Brown, an emergency room physician, told Council he moved to Roanoke in 2010 to be among the first class of the Virginia Tech Carilion medical school.

“I can think of no greater welcome than what you passed in March, a chance to live here,” Brown said, describing his initial difficulty in finding affordable lodging. “Contrary to my dapper appearance, I am not a 1920s railroad baron.”

William Hackworth, a former city attorney who is among the homeowners suing the city over the reforms, told Council the zoning changes carry too many unknowns.

“You’re throwing too much at our neighborhoods all at once,” Hackworth said, citing concerns about by-right land uses, increased density and parking congestion.

City planners estimate the reforms will lead to between 15 and 40 new residences a year. The changes harken back to the city's comprehensive plan, which found residents want more options for seniors and young people to live in the city.

The zoning code allows developers to build up to four-unit apartments on interior lots and up to eight units on corner lots in parts of Roanoke's more dense neighborhoods, including Gainsboro, Old Southwest, Raleigh Court, Wasena and Southeast Roanoke.

Housing in places such as Garden City, Loudon-Melrose and Melrose-Rugby would be maxed out at four to six units on corner lots and duplexes and triplexes on inside lots. In most of South Roanoke and Deyerle, duplexes and triplexes on corner lots would be the exception to the single-family home norm.

While opponents pointed to studies showing similar reforms have not led to a marked decrease in housing costs, supporters emphasized the exclusionary roots of single-family-only zoning.

Councilman Peter Volosin noted that in 1997, when he was in grade school, Roanoke was named the most segregated city in Virginia.

"I won't mention the mayor who was running things, but he might be in this room," Volosin said.

"Yeah, I'm here. I'm here," former mayor David Bowers, who is running for mayor, chimed in from the audience.

Councilwoman Stephanie Moon Reynolds, the lone vote in opposition to the reforms, said she would stick by her earlier vote.

"I am a strong believer in voices heard, voices matter," she said, noting reservations because of similar reforms' efficacy and the planning commission's reversal. She also expressed concern moving forward because of Roanoke's lack of a permanent city manager.

"I cannot just comprehend the fact that you're going to have a manager to come in when you get both sides, hearing mixed emotions, mixed feelings here, and they are having to deal with that," Moon Reynolds said.

Councilman Bev Fitzpatrick — who is filling the unexpired term of Luke Priddy, who voted against the reforms in March — said the emotion of residents who have called him in opposition is deeper than what Council heard Monday night.

"It has racial overtones," he said.

Fitzpatrick said everyone wants to protect the value of their home, but noted multi-family housing already exists in every quadrant of Roanoke.

"Most of all, I'm embarrassed, because I spent 12 years, plus, on this Council and I did not realize we had segregationist zoning," Fitzpatrick said. "I apologize because I never saw it that way. ... I'm embarrassed to think we've let it go as long and as far as it's gone."