

Roanoke City councilman shares thoughts on current zoning code as discussions continue

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Councilman Nick Hagen is calling for adjustments to the city's zoning ordinances as Roanoke leaders prepare for a continuation of a public hearing Monday. Hagen argues the 2024 changes to housing policy bring more risk than reward for local neighborhoods. The 2024 ordinance eliminated single-family-only zoning to allow for middle housing like townhomes and apartments.

Evaluating the Impact of Density

Hagen noted developers established only 34 units since the city implemented the code. He expressed concern that the current system allows developers to replace affordable options with luxury units. "They have tore down what was affordable housing to implement higher end apartments that end up being more expensive," Hagen said. He believes the current code acts as a mechanism to increase density, rent, and property taxes. "I don't think that the mass rezoning that was passed in 2024 is going to lead to anything remotely affordable," Hagen added.

Infrastructure and Transparency Concerns

Hagen also pointed to logistical hurdles like parking and emergency access. He claims that increased density on narrow streets prevents school buses and fire trucks from passing through. "When you're dealing with an emergency, you tend to want to make sure that emergency services can get through," Hagen said. He is also advocating for a return to transparency standards that required developers to notify neighbors of upcoming projects. "It takes away that transparency," he remarked. Hagen noted that residents previously had the ability to petition their government.

Addressing the Affordable Housing Shortage

Mayor Joe Cobb remains a supporter of the ordinance, citing a critical inventory shortage. The Roanoke Redevelopment and Housing Authority reports more than 4,000 people are currently on the waitlist for housing vouchers. Cobb argues that as a landlocked city, Roanoke must embrace "missing middle" housing to support its growing unhoused population. "We've got to find some in that missing middle or lower range along the way," Cobb said. He believes the 2024 code creates inclusionary zoning that removes the remnants of historic redlining.

Shaping the City's Residential Future

Monday's council meeting will continue the public hearing for remaining speakers before a potential vote later this month. One specific adjustment under discussion is increasing the

minimum lot size from 2,000 square feet to approximately 8,000 square feet. Hagen originally sought a full repeal of the 2024 code but now views these tweaks as a necessary compromise. “This is the largest investment usually that a lot of people make in their lives,” Hagen said regarding the homes of local residents.