

Planners flip on zoning changes

Vote casts doubt on efforts to encourage housing diversity

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There's general agreement among residents and city planners that Roanoke needs more housing, but decision makers, including the city planning commission, are split on how to meet that need.

With two of its members absent Monday, the commission flipped a previous vote by deciding 3-2 against recommending a set of proposed zoning amendments to the city council.

The proposed zoning amendments intend to gradually increase housing types by removing the term "single-family" from zoning designations citywide. That change, among other technical amendments, would allow property owners to more readily construct duplexes, town houses, and other dwellings that city planners say are largely missing in Roanoke. The Roanoke City Council already approved similar zoning amendments after contentious deliberation in March. But in June, the council voted to reconsider those changes after some citizens filed a lawsuit that said residents were inadequately notified.

The zoning amendments from March are still in effect for now, at least until the city council votes whether or not to repeal and/or reinstate these proposed amendments during a meeting in September. The planning commission's 3-2 vote not to recommend casts further doubt on the amendments' fate once returned to the council.

In March, the commission initially voted 5-1 in favor of recommending the zoning changes. As of Monday, the board has changed its mind.

Commission members Kevin Berry, James Smith and Pamela Smith voted no, while Scott Terry-Cabbler and Chairman Frank Martin voted yes.

"I'm all about accommodating growth. I'm all about erasing exclusionary zoning laws and practices," James Smith said. "I think there's some great things in here, but I think it's just too broad a change. I'm not sure if it's going to yield the return that we think it's going to yield."

Berry voted yes to the zoning amendments in March. During the board's discussion on Monday, he did not indicate he'd be voting against it.

"This planning staff has done a great job with this. They have been accessible. They have provided forums and educated the public. They have done outreach," Berry said. "In my experience ... this has been the most in-depth process by far, so I just want to commend the planning staff for the job that they've done."

Berry could not be reached immediately after the meeting adjourned, and he did not immediately answer an email asking for comment about why he switched from his position in March.

After the meeting, commission member Pamela Smith said she voted no because she wanted to hear more about how the changes would ensure housing is affordable. She was absent during the commission's vote in March.

"I want us to build. We need to build," Pamela Smith said. "If we could be more secure in the knowledge that the housing is going to be for the people who need the housing."

The two planning commission members who were absent on Monday — Kerri Atwood and Sarah Glenn — had voted yes to the changes in March, but weren't present to cast votes this time.

Reached by phone after the meeting, Atwood said she was in Scotland. She declined to answer how she might have voted on the zoning amendments that were heard Monday.

Glenn did not immediately respond to an email asking how she might have voted on the amendments. A phone number listed for Glenn on a city webpage was not accepting calls.

These zoning changes have been a contentious issue, with residents concerned the changes will harm the character of their neighborhoods, and builders frustrated that single-family zoning stifles the types of projects they can create to address housing demand.

Prior to Monday's commission meeting, a group of citizens who opposed the zoning amendments held a press conference to detail their concerns. One of the people who signed on to the lawsuit against the city council is Anthony Stavola, who led the press conference Monday at the Crafteria downtown.

"There's absolutely no question that there's a housing affordability crisis for many residents in our city, and in fact, nationwide. It's not unique to Roanoke. That is a real concern," Stavola said. "The problem is that the amendments as proposed don't really impact that."

During the commission's hourlong public hearing, 16 people spoke. At least seven speakers, several of whom were home builders, voiced outright or general approval of the zoning amendments, while the others said they were opposed or at least had lingering questions about the impact of the changes.

The city council is scheduled to hold a public hearing about the changes inside the municipal building at 7 p.m. Sept. 16. There are also public meetings scheduled with planning staff at Melrose Library on Aug. 27, and Belmont Library on Aug. 29, both from 6 to 8 p.m.

Once more the decision will come down to the city council. In March, the council voted 5-2 to approve the zoning amendments, during a long-winded meeting that stretched until after 11 p.m.

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