

Eedition

Zoning change effects to be 'incremental'

Some residents say they don't feel concerns have been heard by city

LUKE WEIR, THE ROANOKE TIMES, ROANOKE

Citywide zoning amendments are expected to create fewer than 40 additional housing units per year in Roanoke, according to city planners seeking to dissuade citizen concerns.

"The effects that we see project from this are going to be incremental, slow and very moderate," said Acting Assistant City Manager Chris Chittum. "But over the long term, this will have benefits to Roanoke."

On Monday, Chittum told the city council that 91% of Roanoke's residential areas were zoned strictly for single-family homes, through policies known today as exclusionary zoning. It's a legacy of other city planning policies that have since been corrected, such as redlining, restrictive covenants, indemnity and segregation.

"You don't need to take my word for it. There are a lot of scholars that note and have done research, that this is a form of segregation," Chittum said. "What we did on March 18 was repeal that situation, that we had in place virtually since the 1930s."

The history alone should be enough reason to justify changes that city council approved in March to allow more housing types – like duplexes and townhomes – throughout the city, Chittum said.

But the omnibus zoning amendments were soon met with a lawsuit from a group of citizens, who among their allegations said homeowners weren't adequately notified of the changes.

"This is not risky. We have exemplary neighborhoods in Roanoke that have great character, and are wonderful places to live, and have these types of housing in them," Chittum said. "Just go out and look."

Rather than fight the lawsuit in court – which could take several years, according to City Attorney Tim Spencer – the city council instead intends to repeal and reapprove the same measures in September, after another round of public engagement that included the council discussion on Monday.

"We thought we had a defensible position. But it is easier, more efficient and cheaper to go back through this process again," Spencer said. "Is it somewhat, quite frankly, embarrassing to say we're going back just to make sure we're dotting i's and crossing t's? Yes, it's a little bit. But I think it's much more efficient."

The abundance of single-family homes in Roanoke has led to a shortage of other housing types. There aren't enough small apartments, cottage courts or other "missing middle housing" to meet demands of city residents, many of whom rent rather than own, Chittum said.

"We've got a situation of scarcity," Chittum said. "And that just drives the prices up."

It's created a housing squeeze that leads to affordability issues, especially for people seeking low-income and market-rate dwellings, he said. The zoning amendments aren't the only action that the council has taken to alleviate housing pressures.

"We've got so much more to do, it's almost overwhelming," Chittum said. "But this is an important first step for us to get out of our own way."

Other cities in Virginia have enacted similar zoning changes. By comparison, Roanoke's changes are more moderate than similar amendments in Arlington, Alexandria and Charlottesville, Chittum said.

Nonetheless, some Roanoke residents say they still don't feel their concerns have been heard by city staff. One of the people who signed onto the citizens' lawsuit is Anthony Stavola, who sat through the 90-minute city council presentation on Monday.

"It was a continuation of the same process and communication style that we've been seeing from the beginning," Stavola said. "Understandably, there's a lot of work that's been done on the part of the city planning staff. But there's a tendency not to ask the hard questions."

Stavola said he and other residents don't agree with some of the conclusions that city staff presented, such as about impacts to parking density and overall effectiveness of the zoning changes.

"Where are the questions saying 'how come we have these different perceptions?'" Stavola said. "How do we get further clarification of that?"

During the meeting, Chittum told the council that planning staff are never dismissive of any input they hear from residents.

"We do have disagreements," Chittum said. "We get to a point where we heard you, and that's as far as we can go. We have a fundamental divergence of interests."

The citizens who are opposed to zoning reform have scheduled a press conference at the Crafteria in downtown Roanoke on Monday at 12:15 p.m. That event will precede a city Planning Commission public hearing about the zoning amendments inside the municipal building scheduled for 1:30 p.m.

City staff published a 36-page report and study with details about the needs and reasons behind these zoning changes. The document is available online at planroanoke.org/ zoning.

Several council members, including Trish White-Boyd, requested that planning staff hold additional public meetings before the zoning amendments go back for reapproval.

"These are major considerations," White-Boyd said. "We just need to do whatever we can to make sure that the community is aware of it."

An email from the city on Tuesday said two community meetings will be scheduled in coming weeks. Other council members on Monday commended the months of public outreach, including a yard sign campaign, that staff conducted ahead of March's vote.

"We need to be welcoming more neighbors to Roanoke City," said Councilman Peter Volosin. "This is the way we're going to do it, by making sure that we stop being discriminatory and exclusionary with our zoning."

Mayor Sherman Lea said the city does more public relations work now than it has ever done in the past, but people will still say they were unaware of what's happening.

"As a citizen, you have a responsibility to find out what's going on... it can't just be all to the staff," Lea said. "We can't spoon-feed you on everything."

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