

Roanoke Zoning Clash Returns To Dais with a Bang

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New plan formed for lingering Roanoke zoning controversy

Roanoke leaders aim to adjust, but not completely gut, controversial zoning reforms designed to create more multifamily housing.

The effort will be led by the two city council members who had the most intense exchanges about the matter Monday: **Nick Hagen** and **Peter Volosin**.

Mayor Joe Cobb, near the end of almost an hour of debate, said Hagen and Volosin had proven they should be part of a possible solution.

The path forward council agreed on: planning staff will talk with stakeholders, including concerned citizens, to come up with specific potential amendments. Hagen, a lawyer who campaigned against the zoning changes, and Volosin, a real estate agent who championed the policies, will review those suggestions. The council would then discuss what to do, likely in October.

The substantial zoning reform was put in place to try to create more housing options while essentially doing away with exclusive single-family zoning. Opening neighborhoods up to more creative development opportunities can increase affordable housing stock, arguably the city's biggest need, according to supporters of the changes.

Opposition formed over potential upheaval to longtime single-family neighborhoods through multi-family development. The ordinance approval promptly got the city sued by a group of citizens. That has required the city to spend about \$85,000 in taxpayer money for legal fees to a private firm as of May. A hearing on the lawsuits is scheduled for Aug. 21.

City Attorney Tim Spencer said Monday his office has tried to keep those costs down by providing some in-house work. Other localities have spent more on similar zoning-related lawsuits, including Arlington, which has spent \$1.4 million and Charlottesville, which has spent more than \$100,000, according to information provided by the city of Roanoke.

"One of my largest concerns that I've had about this is the lack of public input when these changes occur in neighborhoods," Hagen said. "I've found that when that happens, people tend to get litigious, which then raises costs for everybody."

Hagen restarted the formal discussion of the issue by asking for a repeal of the ordinance or a way to achieve revisions. He did that by filing a "council member initiative" form, a new way for ideas to be brought to the larger group. A majority of council members who took office this year

— Hagen, **Vice Mayor Terry McGuire**, **Phazhon Nash** and **Evelyn Powers** — previously said they were in favor of at least making amendments to the ordinance.

On his initiative form, Hagen wrote that a potential repeal or substantial revision “reasserts the goals of ensuring equitable development and that people have a voice again.”

Volosin said he’s not against some possible tweaks. But he said it makes no sense to ask city staffers to undertake a full review of the ordinance – particularly after they went through the substantial work to change it, including two public input phases before it was approved in September.

“For you to come and then just say ‘here, study everything,’ I think is a little bit too vague,” Volosin told Hagen.

Volosin, to prove a point that the city has provided adequate public input, then asked city **Planning Director Jillian Papa** to detail the outreach that was completed twice in 2024, including meetings and online feedback and a campaign that included posting yard signs in neighborhoods.

While she was doing that, Hagen asked Papa: “Director, how many people on average attended those meetings?”

It ranged from a high of about 30 people to a low of around four, she responded.

One of the citizens suing the city, **Tony Stavola**, attended Monday’s meeting. He said he plans to be part of the ongoing conversations prompted by the council’s latest decision.

Asked about previous public input opportunities, Stavola said he doesn’t believe the city went about it the right way.

For instance, he said the yard signs used by the city read “Say yes to housing.”

That’s an advocacy campaign that a lot of people either didn’t pay much attention to – or didn’t realize had potential far-reaching impacts, he said.

McGuire also said the yard signs were “not public engagement, that was a PR campaign to try to influence the outcome.”

Following Monday’s meeting, **Councilwoman Vivian Sanchez-Jones**, who voted for the zoning reform last year, expressed frustration over the ongoing debate.

She said it’s much about not-in-my-backyard complaints in certain areas of the city.