

Richmond 300: Code Refresh Advisory Council Meeting Notes

Date: March 12, 2025, 4 P.M.
Location: City Hall, 5th Floor Conference Room
900 E. Broad Street, Richmond, VA 23219
Microsoft Teams (<https://bit.ly/CodeRefreshAC>)



DEPARTMENT OF PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT REVIEW

Members Present: Wayne Credle (virtually), Bennie Gates, Elizabeth Greenfield, Philip Hart, David Johannas, Eric Mai, Casey Overton, Damian Pitt, Ellen Robertson, Brian White, Charlie Wilson, Roger York

Members Absent: Yanina James, Preston Lloyd, Kendra Norrell, Maritza Pechin, Jennifer Mullen, Michelle Parrish

CALL TO ORDER

Roll Call

Chair Greenfield called the meeting to order at 4:04 P.M. Chair Greenfield called the roll. Chair Greenfield recognized Rev. Dr. Credle's virtual attendance. Due to lack of a quorum, motions to allow his virtual participation had to be postponed.

Chair's Comments

Chair Greenfield thanked everyone for attending. She reminded everyone of the purpose of the Council is to advise the Planning Commission, Department of Planning and Development Review, and the consultant team on the zoning ordinance revision process.

Approval of January Meeting Notes

With the lack of a quorum present, motions to allow virtual participation and approval of minutes were postponed.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Chair Greenfield opened the floor to public comment.

Mr. Will Wilson, a 2nd District resident of the Jackson Ward neighborhood, expressed his appreciation for the Code Refresh Open Houses in February, which he attended. His block was featured within the Pattern Book's block-scale analysis. He supported allowing duplexes/two dwelling units per lot in residential areas and expressed his wishes for duplexes to remain in the draft zoning code as a by-right use. He noted this pattern currently exists in his neighborhood, highlighting his block in particular as an example of how duplexes and single-family residences could coexist well together. Recognizing the current housing supply crisis, he mentioned that the demand for smaller living spaces has increased, especially considering historic reductions in family size. Additionally, he supported removing the side street setback requirement to allow more buildable space for the construction of additional units.

Mr. Joseph Carlisle, of the Church Hill North neighborhood, strongly supported by-right duplexes in all residential zoning districts as a way to gently increase density. He opposed the creation of an auto-oriented zoning district (CG-4) for its detractions from the city's goals of walkability and connection. He suggested that the auto-oriented zoning district be eliminated from the proposed code and recommended

that auto-oriented development projects be afforded the special use permit review process should a developer wish to construct one.

Ms. Lee Williams, of the 5th District, represented the Sierra Club, an organization which advocates for the planet, people, and places. Noting land use's impact on pollution and climate change, she stressed the city's need to reduce vehicle-miles traveled (VMT) in order to meet climate goals. She noted driving less, reducing the need for driving, and making shorter car trips as ways to reduce vehicle-miles traveled.

Mr. Casey Flores, of the Swansboro neighborhood, was excited for the city's opportunity to do something extraordinary along the Hull Street corridor. He described the stretch between Manchester and Southside Plaza as a "blank canvas" and advocated for maximal zoning usage within that portion of Hull Street, particularly noting the proposed north-south bus rapid transit (BRT) project planned for this corridor. He expressed a vision for taller buildings along the street, providing views of the downtown skyline.

Mr. Andrew Lepler voiced his support for by-right duplexes, noticing the benefits from a housing and environmental justice perspective.

Ms. Patricia Merrill, a resident of the 1st District, opposed the by-right duplexes. She recognized the challenges of the housing crisis, but noted that a one-size-fits-all approach to allowing duplexes in all residential districts ignores neighborhoods with differing character. In some neighborhoods, residents decided to move there for the "single-family detached homes" character, and they expect this character to remain. She felt their desires should not be ignored.

Seeing no other members of the public wishing to speak, Chair Greenfield closed the public comment period.

Approval of Councilmembers' Virtual Participation

Now with a quorum present, Chair Greenfield invited a motion to allow Rev. Dr. Credle to participate virtually. A motion was made by Mr. White, and seconded by Mr. Wilson. The motion passed.

Approval of January Meeting Notes

Mr. Johannas made a motion to approve the January meeting notes, and Dr. Pitt seconded the motion. The motion passed and the meeting notes were approved.

COUNCIL RECAP AND MEETING INTRODUCTION

Ms. Marianne Pitts began with a brief review of the previous meeting. She also provided an overview of the present meeting, noting a brief presentation with key questions for discussion, followed by a workshopping activity.

WORKING GROUPS UPDATE

Ms. Pitts provided an update on the formation of the working groups. She noted the working groups would mirror the five Richmond 300 topic areas and would meet virtually in between the monthly Advisory Council meetings to review the draft zoning code from their topic area's lens. She shared that the first working group meetings are expected to take place after the upcoming April meeting and share a report-out of their discussion at the following May meeting. She stated staff would work with Advisory Councilmembers soon to begin organizing the working groups.

CONSULTANT PRESENTATION AND ADVISORY COUNCIL DISCUSSION

Mr. Rene Biberstein, of Code Studio, began the consultant presentation by overviewing the key takeaways from the three Code Refresh open houses held a couple weeks prior. In total, 113 people attended and 292 comments were received, which will be used to tweak the content of the draft code. Some comments expressed a desire for smaller lot sizes and more mixed-use and transit-oriented development, whereas some comments expressed concerns over housing affordability, negative perceptions about the city's attentiveness to current residents, and infrastructural capacity for future developments. Additionally, there was large support for allowing duplexes by right in Residential Detached (RD-) districts.

Mr. Biberstein also reviewed the timeline for the Module 1 phase. He explained that the Districts and Form Standards would be reviewed in the present meeting, with use tables and use definitions being discussed at the April Advisory Council meeting, and full draft maps for the entire city expected for the May Advisory Council meeting. Mr. Biberstein reported that the proposed districts have not substantially changed since the previous meeting. However, he noted that the Park (PRK) and Conservation (CON) open space zoning districts have been merged into one district after talking with city staff, and a few more metrics have been added within some of the draft districts. He noted that other changes were currently under consideration as a result of public comments received during the open houses.

General Question #1: Duplexes in Residential Districts

Mr. Biberstein introduced the first discussion question for the Council, which revolved around the question of duplexes. He explained that the current draft proposes two units per lot in residential districts, but does not distinguish or specify whether they should be contained within a single building (a duplex) or two separate (detached) buildings. Mr. Biberstein asked the Council if such a distinction matters and if one form should be allowed over the other.

Mr. Mai, Dr. Pitt, and Mr. Johannas were all in agreement that it likely wouldn't matter whether two units were contained within a single building or two separate ones. Dr. Pitt added that he originally conceived of this provision allowing a duplex arrangement (one building) or a single home with ADU— but the idea of two full sized homes on one lot seemed acceptable as well. Mr. Johannas added that he was interested in how the form would look, noting that controlling the design of these buildings on a neighborhood-specific level would be a different matter to discuss. Mr. Wilson reminded Council that two-unit building designs can take on a variety of forms, including up/down units (stacked on top of each other), side-by-side units, and front/rear units. Mr. Wilson also talked about building code considerations for a two-unit building.

Mr. Hart believed that duplexes should only take the form of a single-building design, if duplexes were to be allowed at all.

Mr. Colin Scarff, of Code Studio, asked for the Council's opinion on whether separate detached structures at the rear alley would be appropriate. Mr. York asked if market demand and homebuyer preferences would support such a development pattern.

Mr. Wilson considered the administrative implications of permitting a second unit on a lot that currently has one unit (for example: must the second unit look similar to the existing house?) and recommended that the city's zoning team be involved in the discussion. Mr. Johannas suggested that the configuration of any two-unit lot should follow the development pattern of what is already in the neighborhood, to ensure visual compatibility and consistency.

Ms. Overton recognized that there is generally more space within the rear yard to build a second unit. She was not as concerned about the new structure's appearance since it was less likely to be seen when built behind an existing home. She added that other form restrictions like building height and width would dictate the new structure's size and help control its visibility and appearance.

Based on Council's discussion, Chair Greenfield requested that the consultants prepare some draft language for duplexes for Council review, which should include design considerations for all potential configurations (attached, detached and stacked structures).

General Question #2: Removing Minimum Lot Area

Mr. Biberstein asked the Council about whether minimum lot area should be removed from residential zoning districts, in favor of only regulating by lot width instead. Mr. York informed the Council about the subdivision ordinance's 100-foot minimum lot depth requirement, and Chair Greenfield asked if that requirement stemmed from Code of Virginia statutes. Mr. Wilson informed Council that it was possible for developers to seek a waiver from that requirement of the subdivision ordinance.

To illustrate the implication of only regulating lot width, Mr. Biberstein explained the illustrative diagram provided in his slideshow presentation. It depicted the possibility of a long corner lot being potentially subdivided into four smaller lots facing the side street. Mr. Biberstein asked Council whether this should be allowed.

A couple Councilmembers provided examples of where this form of development already exists in the city. Mr. Wilson cited Harrison Street, and Mr. Mai cited 25th Street in Church Hill. Mr. Mai supported this concept as a way to increase the number of smaller-lot starter homes in the city.

Mr. Johannas worried that subdividing into smaller lots could create design inconsistencies within established neighborhoods, where limited building space on small lots could cause new homes to sit closer to the street. The implications of this would be most noticeable on the new corner lot resulting from the subdivision, where homes might jut out further into the typical front yard setback observed along the street. Mr. Wilson recommended special setback considerations for corner lots as a potential remedy to this concern.

Director Kevin Vonck explained his rationale for regulating lot width only, as it allows for the development of more housing without the need of installing/maintaining new infrastructure. New units would be able to tap into existing infrastructure and take advantage of the capacity that is already there.

How To Read Draft Districts, Rules for Interpretation, and Mapping

Mr. Biberstein continued his presentation and offered guidance on how to read the sample pages from the draft districts and rules for interpretation sections of the draft code. He showed diagrams as well as sample standards and metrics using the RD-A and MX-4 draft districts as examples. Mr. Hart asked if Councilmembers would be given the opportunity to comment on the measurements and metrics being proposed. Mr. Biberstein confirmed there would be opportunity at the present meeting, and also encouraged Councilmembers to bring suggested edits to the April meeting. He also stated that the working groups are expected to examine these measurements extensively in the coming months. Chair Greenfield requested that staff allot time during the next meeting to discuss this more after Council has had a chance to review the material.

Mr. Biberstein also offered guidance on how to read the draft mapping diagrams. An aerial map, existing zoning map, Richmond 300 Future Land Use map, and draft map tests were provided for certain areas of the city to aid in the workshop discussion activity.

Workshop Discussion Activity

Mr. Biberstein overviewed each of the three discussion questions before Council. Regarding Discussion Topic #1: Upzoning Major Streets in Residential Areas, he explained the "first-pass" methodology used to produce the draft map tests. Current zoning districts were correlated to their corresponding proposed districts, with special rules for upzoning being applied to parcels along major streets.

Regarding Discussion Topic #2: Rear Transitions, Mr. Biberstein prompted Council to consider if the maximum height limits along the boundaries of zoning districts made sense on the draft map tests. He asked Council to consider which rear transition requirements were most appropriate (for example, stepbacks vs. setbacks).

Regarding Discussion Topic #3: Auto-Oriented Corridors, Mr. Biberstein sought Council's advice on whether the CG-4 zoning district should be applied more or less extensively, given the auto-oriented nature of many corridors like Hull Street and Midlothian Turnpike today.

Councilmembers worked in groups to discuss the questions and complete the workshopping activity.

Following the activity, all three groups presented a quick report-out of one or two high-level insights stemming from their group's discussion. Director Vonck reported on his group's consideration of upzoning on major streets, particularly if there should be an additional degree of upzoning where two major streets intersect. Mr. Hart and Mr. Johannas reported together on a few ideas stemming from their group's discussion. Mr. Hart highlighted that the "two-step up" approach to upzoning may be too extreme in some cases, as it results in today's R-1 properties (20,000 square foot minimum lot areas) being upzoned to the proposed RD-C zoning district (2,000 square foot lot areas). Such a stark contrast would be inconsistent within some neighborhoods. Mr. Hart reported it might be appropriate to promote additional development only along streets that currently have multifamily uses (like certain sections of Grove and Patterson avenues) as opposed to streets that currently lack multifamily uses (like Cary Street Rd). Mr. Johannas reported on their group's support of using the inclined plane as a rear transition in cases where extreme height differences exist. He also stated Southside areas (like Southside Plaza) could be upzoned more. Lastly, Mr. Wilson reported on his group's support for concentrating density along the East End's major corridors. They also discussed Shockoe Bottom's proposed MX-4 delineation, and how that may be too limiting in terms of height.

At the conclusion of the report-outs, Mr. Biberstein asked Councilmembers to continue reviewing the mapping tests in more detail to prepare for further discussion at the next meeting in April, alongside discussions on uses. Mr. Gates requested that the consultant presentations be shared with Councilmembers sooner, well ahead of the April meeting, to allow time for material review beforehand. Mr. Johannas asked if there would be opportunities to discuss or workshop collaboratively outside of the meetings, in a "training" or "study session" style of environment. Mr. Brian Mercer informed Council that he offers one-on-one trainings and discussion with Councilmembers when requested. At most, two Councilmembers may gather and discuss the materials; however, three or more Councilmembers gathered together would require an official public notice of the meeting. Chair Greenfield requested that staff share Mr. Mercer's email address with the Council so any interested member is able to reach out and take advantage of the one-on-one training and discussion opportunities.

ADJOURNMENT

Chair Greenfield announced the next meeting is scheduled on April 9, 2025, at 4 P.M. in the 5th Floor Conference Room at City Hall (900 E. Broad St, Richmond, VA 23219). She informed the Council that the boards and surveys from the Code Refresh Open Houses are available online and that the survey will close on March 31st.

Chair Greenfield adjourned the meeting at 6:05 P.M.