

Blacksburg Considers Zoning Amendments to Permit More Single Family Housing

The Town of Blacksburg is considering a Zoning Ordinance amendment to address the need for additional residential development. This proposed amendment (Ordinance 2053) would provide a framework for small lot residential development to fill a market need for smaller homes and the “missing middle” housing market.

In the Town’s 2017 Comprehensive Plan survey, 41% of the 1,500 respondents identified the need for more affordable housing as one of three top community priorities. In a 2021 Blacksburg Housing survey, the majority of respondents overwhelmingly supported small lot single-family development as an acceptable and priority strategy for increasing housing affordability and housing choice for permanent residents. The adopted Comprehensive Plan specifically calls for the Town to review minimum lot sizes and promote smaller homes.

In response, Town staff has been working on drafting the Zoning Ordinance changes that would permit residential development on smaller lots, while also ensuring high quality design and neighborhood amenities.

The residential development that has occurred in Town over the past 5-10 years has predominately been larger lot detached single-family development and student apartment complexes. However, strong and financially resilient communities require a variety of housing types, not just large single-family detached homes on one end of the spectrum and dense apartment complexes on the other. A wider range of housing options, such as smaller single-family detached homes, duplexes, and townhomes are needed to support a diverse community of residents. In today’s market, these housing types are harder to build due to a combination of factors, including the Town’s current zoning regulations.

Here are some key aspects about the proposed Small Lot Residential Zoning Ordinance Amendment. As currently drafted, Ordinance 2053 would:

- **Apply only to properties that are zoned R-4 Low-Density Residential and have a minimum area of two contiguous acres.** The Town of Blacksburg is divided into different zones that each have their own land use designation. Some areas are strictly for residential use, some are strictly for commercial use but most allow a little bit of both. The current R-4 zoning district governs development in much of the Town’s traditional single-family neighborhoods. Areas eligible for development as part of proposed Ordinance 2053 must have a minimum of two contiguous developable acres under common ownership. The requirement for two contiguous developable acres means that proposed Ordinance 2053 is not intended for infill development.
- **Allow for smaller homes on smaller lots.** The current R-4 zoning district only allows for strictly single-family residential development with minimum lot sizes of 10,000 square ft. The proposed zoning ordinance change would allow for development on a minimum 3,000 square foot lot size (.06 of an acre) with smaller front, side and back yard setbacks, which would vary depending on lot size. It would also allow for homes with an overall height of 30 feet or 2-1/2 stories. However, the footprint of the home could not exceed 25% of the lot size, which between the maximum footprint and the maximum

height helps ensure that the homes are more modest in overall square footage. These conditions were developed to retain the character of single-family neighborhoods.

- **Allow duplexes and townhomes only if an alley serves them.** Typically, only detached single-family dwellings are allowed in the R-4 zoning district. This amendment would permit duplexes and townhomes in small lot developments with alley access. The goal is to minimize driveways at the street and ensure a pedestrian friendly streetscape.
- **Limit the number of duplexes and townhomes in a small lot development.** On sites of less than 5 acres, attached units shall comprise no more than 50% of the total units. On sites 5 acres or more, attached units shall be limited to no more than 30% of the total units. This is intended to ensure that small lot developments contain a mix of unit types within them when attached units are included.
- **Require sidewalks on both sides of the street.** This will accommodate more users with the higher density.
- **Maintain the minimum requirement that 10% of the development must be open space.** This retains the current open space standard for R-4 subdivisions. For developments containing more than 10 attached duplex or townhome units, a minimum of 15% of the development must be preserved as open space. This helps ensure that open space is adequate and can accommodate features such as playgrounds, ball fields, and neighborhood gathering spaces.
- **Reduce the number of unrelated individuals that could live in the home.** The occupancy for the district will be a family plus no more than one (1) unrelated person; or no more than two (2) unrelated persons per residential dwelling. The current standard for R-4 allows for up to 3 unrelated persons. The Town desires to ensure that new units do not default to investment properties housing students, but rather to create new options for long-term residents or those who may want to live in Blacksburg.
- **Allow for small lot residential development ‘by-right’ if developers meet all the conditions of the ordinance.** ‘By-right’ development refers to projects that are permitted under current zoning and do not require any legislative action by Town Council. They are approved administratively and do not require public hearings because they already meet Town standards.

To learn more about the proposed Small Lot Residential Zoning Amendment (Ordinance 2053) and provide your feedback online, please visit: <https://letstalkblacksburg.org/small-lots>.

The Town also plans to hold a community meeting on Thursday September 26, 2024, at 6:30 pm in the Community Room at the Blacksburg Community Center to go over the amendment in more detail and provide an opportunity for citizens to share their feedback in person.