



Richmond City Council

900 East Broad Street
Richmond, VA 23219
www.rva.gov/office-city-clerk

Code Refresh Work Session Minutes

Monday, June 15, 2026

4:00 PM

Council Chamber, 2nd Floor - City Hall

Council Members Present

The Honorable Cynthia Newbille, President
The Honorable Katherine Jordan, Vice President
The Honorable Andrew Breton (late arrival)
The Honorable Kenya Gibson (early exit)
The Honorable Nicole Jones
The Honorable Stephanie Lynch (early exit)
The Honorable Ellen Robertson
The Honorable Reva Trammell

Absent

The Honorable Sarah Abubaker

Others in Attendance

Candice Reid, City Clerk
Tabrica Rentz, Deputy City Attorney
RJ Warren, Council Chief of Staff

Call to Order

Council President Cynthia Newbille called the meeting to order at 4:05 p.m. and presided.

Councilor Andrew Breton arrived at 4:07 p.m. and was seated.

Chamber Emergency Evacuation Plan Announcement

At the President's request, the City Clerk provided information on the appropriate way to evacuate the Council Chamber in an emergency.

RJ Warren, Council Chief of Staff, advised that city administration and the Mayor's Office requested the work session to present additional information on Code Refresh and the ongoing update of the city's zoning ordinance. Administration would present in full, followed by two rounds of Council remarks of five minutes per member per round. There was no public comment at the work session. Members were advised to direct follow-up questions, including those not reached during the two rounds, to the Chief of Staff for forwarding to city administration. Council staff will compile all questions and responses from the session and any follow-up and provide them to members.

Presentation: Code Refresh Overview

Zoning Code Rewrite Update: Draft Two Engagement Summary and Preview of Draft Three Decisions ~ Kevin Vonck, Director of Planning and Development Review

[CD.2026.174](#) Code Refresh Draft 3 Presentation

Kevin Vonck, Director of Planning and Development Review, presented an update on Code Refresh, noting approximately two years of work on the zoning ordinance update. The department is moving from Draft 2 to Draft 3 and is engaging the elected and appointed bodies during the same week: City Council, followed by the Planning Commission and the Zoning Advisory Committee. The purpose of the session was to obtain Council feedback on specific outstanding questions and to identify what additional information Council needs to make decisions as the process moves forward. A copy of the presentation provided has been filed.

Administration explained that the existing zoning ordinance predates the current master plan and does not align with city goals for housing choice, neighborhood walkability, economic vitality, and climate resilience. Richmond 300 identifies rewriting the zoning ordinance as a priority action, and state law requires that the zoning ordinance implement the master plan. The update is framed around three themes drawn from Richmond 300: equity, sustainability, and community.

Administration described the sources informing the drafts, including the Code of Virginia, a pattern book of existing conditions, an economic consultant analysis of development scenarios, the Zoning Advisory Committee and its working groups, review by other city departments, peer city research, and extensive public engagement through district and civic association meetings, open houses, pop-up events, and online comment.

Administration reported substantial agreement on several elements, including the number of zoning districts, expanded use of conditional use permits in place of special use permits, creation of an open space district, standards for building siting and lot coverage, minimum tree canopy requirements, and pedestrian and mobility standards.

Questions Presented for Council Feedback

Administration identified three questions on which feedback has spanned the widest range and requested Council input for incorporation into Draft 3.

- Number of people in a household: The current code permits no more than three unrelated people, or a combination of related and unrelated people. Draft 1 did not define the limit. Draft 2 proposed eight or fewer unrelated individuals, based on Code of Virginia provisions addressing certain group living situations. Draft 3 contemplates moving occupancy limits out of the zoning ordinance and relying on the building code, which sets health and safety occupancy based on the structure and number of bedrooms.
- Zoning of places of worship: The current code zones places of worship consistent with surrounding neighborhoods, ranging from R-1 to B-4. Draft 1 placed them primarily in the institutional district. Draft 2 proposed NX3, which feedback indicated could permit development beyond the intended scale. Draft 3 proposes a more nuanced approach using the small multifamily and residential cottage districts, which continue to permit assembly uses while allowing housing to be introduced on the land: RMA up to six units, RMB up to twelve units, RMC unlimited in transit corridors and growth nodes, and RC for cottage-scale homes of up to 1,200 square feet arranged around a courtyard.
- Number of dwelling units on a lot: The current code permits one principal dwelling unit plus an accessory dwelling unit of up to one-third the size of the principal unit or 500 square feet, whichever is greater. Draft 1 proposed up to two principal dwelling units plus an accessory unit, which drew concern that it could incentivize demolition and displacement where land value is high and improvement value is low. A preservation bonus was introduced requiring retention of the existing unit. Draft 3 would allow the preserved existing building to contain one or two units plus an accessory dwelling unit of under 1,200 square feet, with a maximum of two buildings on the property. If the existing building is demolished, the property reverts to one principal unit plus an accessory unit, and full new construction is available only where the lot has been vacant for five years.

Richmond 300 Annual Report and Supporting Data

Council questioned the status of the annual progress report required by the master plan and noted that it had not been presented to Council. Administration responded that the report has been presented to the Planning Commission, typically during the summer months, that the 2026 update reflecting 2025 activity is due, and that prior and future reports will be shared with Council. The President requested that Council receive a presentation on the annual report as well as an overview of the market analysis.

Market Analysis and Housing Affordability

Council raised concerns that the consultant market analysis indicates that housing produced under the new code would be largely developer driven and concentrated in the most affluent areas, and that the analysis did not demonstrate delivery of affordable housing. Administration clarified that the analysis is a market study and reflects only what the market will produce. Approximately two-thirds of projected new units would occur at nodes and corridors, consistent with master plan direction, while parts of Southside show limited market growth, indicating a need to consider incentives to catalyze development in those areas.

Administration stated that the code addresses affordability principally from a supply perspective and by enabling housing products that do not exist under current regulations, and that additional tools are required to achieve deeper affordability. These include tools provided by the General Assembly during the past session, such as administrative rezoning and incentives for inclusionary zoning. Administration noted that proposed zoning generally does not reach the maximum intensity, density, and height contemplated by the master plan, which preserves room to negotiate for affordability, and agreed to provide maps illustrating the difference.

Merrick Malone, Director of Housing and Community Development, described complementary tools used by the administration, including performance grants, the Affordable Housing Trust Fund, strategic use of surplus city land, accessory dwelling units as multigenerational housing, and the strategic use of inclusionary zoning as an incentive.

Growth, Schools, and Infrastructure

Council questioned how growth is measured, noted that Richmond Public Schools was not part of the master plan process, and raised concerns about school overcrowding and about directing growth without accounting for population already present in Southside. Administration described increased coordination with Richmond Public Schools, including sharing project data so the school division can assess potential enrollment impacts, and noted that enrollment change also reflects families relocating within the city and region. Administration provided historical context indicating that public school enrollment was just under 60,000 students in 1970 compared with under 30,000 today, and that most households moving into the city are one and two person households. Administration agreed to bring supporting data forward.

Council also raised readiness questions regarding utilities, traffic safety, and schools. Administration described coordination with the utility and transportation departments on capacity, system-wide improvements through the capital improvement plan, and project-by-project improvements, and noted that spreading infrastructure costs across more property owners reduces the burden on individual owners.

Demolition, Preservation, and Historic Districts

Council expressed concern that permitting additional units could incentivize demolition of existing affordable homes. Administration reported that consultant analysis of Draft 1 projected roughly twenty demolitions per year in certain districts and a range of approximately thirty to forty per year across the residential multifamily districts, concentrated in the central city and West End where the market is most active, compared with approximately eighty demolitions citywide during the past year including commercial property. Administration stated that removing the by-right option without preservation further reduces that exposure.

Administration reported that the Cultural Heritage Stewardship Plan has been recommended for adoption by the Planning Commission and will be forwarded for Council consideration. All existing city old and historic districts carry into the new code, and the code proposes two additional lighter levels of regulation: a design standards framework that neighborhoods may adopt from the bottom up with the consent of a majority of property owners, and a district that requires demolition review. Administration also described work with the architectural community to develop pre-approved accessory dwelling unit designs to reduce design and construction costs.

State Legislation Affecting Faith-Based and Nonprofit Property

Council and administration discussed recently enacted state legislation, identified as HB 1279, addressing development on land owned by property tax exempt nonprofit entities, including faith-based organizations. Staff clarified that the legislation is a mandate that takes effect January 1 and carries a five-year sunset. Because the current code does not permit the development options contemplated, the city may adopt a local administrative ordinance establishing procedures, provided it substantially complies and is consistent by January 1. Council noted that any such ordinance would still require Council action, and administration indicated that a separate proposal would be necessary.

Occupancy Limits

Members expressed a range of views. Some favored retaining the current limit of three unrelated people, citing enforcement difficulties and neighborhood impacts, while others suggested that three is conservative and that four or five would be more realistic, and that eight is too high. Administration observed that zoning cannot regulate the quality of management, noting that well managed group living arrangements generate few complaints while poorly managed arrangements generate complaints regardless of the number of residents. Administration further noted that housing providers identified group living as part of the continuum of care, and that the Code of Virginia permits up to eight people in certain circumstances. Council asked whether recovery and transitional housing had been accounted for in the analysis.

Special Use Permits and By-Right Development

Administration reported that over recent years approximately one-third of special use permits were for single-family homes and approximately another third were for very small residential projects, many required only because of minimum lot width standards. Administration noted that the city processed more than one hundred special use permits and three rezonings in the prior year. Moving these categories to by-right development is intended to reduce time, cost, and uncertainty, including for affordable housing projects, and to lower barriers for small-scale builders who lack the resources to pursue a legislative process.

Growth Projections and Housing Production

In response to Council questions regarding the level of housing production the code would support, administration reported consultant projections of approximately 1,800 to 1,900 market rate units per year at the low range, approximately 2,400 units per year at the medium range, and more than 3,000 units per year at the high range. Recent production has been approximately 2,500 units per year, including affordable units delivered through partnerships and tax credit projects. Administration stated that the proposed code is intended to accommodate anticipated growth with additional capacity should growth accelerate.

Neighborhood Scale and Development Patterns

Responding to concerns that development patterns seen in Manchester and Scott's Addition could occur elsewhere, administration stated that those areas are identified in the master plan for growth and intensity and are zoned accordingly, including categories permitting seven stories and taller along certain corridors. Higher intensity mixed use categories are not applied within neighborhoods. Residential categories permit a few stories in height and include contextual standards limiting new construction to one story above adjacent properties. Administration stated that large scale development of that type would not be permitted by right in those neighborhoods.

Community Engagement

Members commended the level of public engagement over the past two years, noting that approximately 5,000 individuals participated in the process. Council requested substantially expanded engagement on the Southside, including direct contact with households, expressing concern that many residents who would be affected have not been engaged and that decisions should not be made before those residents have an opportunity to participate. Members also requested clarity on the geographic distribution of engagement to date.

Council Priorities for Draft 3

The President identified items to be addressed as the third draft is developed, including affordable housing incentives and consideration of the area median income qualification levels used to achieve deeper affordability, strategies to minimize displacement, tree canopy minimums and the presence of heat islands, green space standards and access, commercial corridor development and its catalytic potential, occupancy limits, and infrastructure capacity. The President advised that a further list of items would be submitted to the Chief of Staff for transmittal to administration.

The President requested that the Cultural Heritage Stewardship Plan and the historic district proposals come before Council in advance of Draft 3. Administration responded that the intent is for Council to be able to consider those resolutions before it considers the final draft of the ordinance.

Members additionally requested information on transition treatments where residential districts adjoin growth nodes, the strength of tree canopy requirements, whether state agencies may bypass local zoning, mechanisms to facilitate condominium development, cultural and design overlays available to neighborhoods, and the parallel initiatives underway outside the zoning ordinance that support the goals of Richmond 300.

Definitions and Public Communication

Council emphasized the need to define terms clearly for the public before any action is taken, including what constitutes affordable housing, what is meant by private equity, and how affordable housing is financed, noting that low-income housing tax credit financing is a form of equity necessary to produce affordable housing. Concern was expressed regarding the characterization of a specific council district in connection with private equity ownership, and a request was made for supporting data. Members also asked that common misconceptions be addressed directly, including the belief that the ordinance would permit multifamily buildings of significant height within established single-family blocks, and asked that the location and scale of the identified growth corridors be clearly illustrated.

Administration acknowledged the request, stating that zoning cannot address all the factors influencing housing costs, and that the ordinance is a necessary but not sufficient tool that must be paired with other programs and investments.

Councilor Kenya Gibson left the meeting at 6:08 p.m.

Councilor Stephanie Lynch left the meeting at 6:25 p.m.

Adjournment

There being no further business, the meeting adjourned at 6:27 p.m.

CITY CLERK