

# Charlottesville Moves a Step Closer to Single Room Affordable Housing

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Single room occupancy (SRO) housing units have been touted as one way to address the community's homeless issue by providing an affordable studio apartment to qualified individuals. Virginia Supportive Housing (VSH), a Richmond-based non-profit, has announced its plans to build a 60-unit facility somewhere inside Charlottesville City limits. City Council has allocated \$125,000 to support their efforts.

However, the City's zoning code does not necessarily accommodate SRO facilities. On one hand, the units would need to be on a parcel of land that allowed for high residential density. On the other, VSH offers support services that would not necessarily be allowed in residential zoning districts.

The Charlottesville Planning Commission narrowly recommended making changes to the City's zoning ordinance with a 3-2 vote at its meeting on June 9, 2009. Under their changes, a certain percentage of units could be open to more than one person. The Commission also supported a recommendation by VSH that each unit contain a bathroom and kitchen area, despite the comments of Commissioner Michael Osteen who said that financing those units may prove to be problematic.

The Commission also recommended adding the University Medium Density (UMD) and University High Density (UHD) zoning districts to a list of where SRO units could be built. However, City Planner Ebony Walden said because the public hearing notice did not specify that the two districts were being considered, they could not be added to the ordinance without a new round of public hearings.

The first reading of the ordinance change was before the City Council during their meeting on July 6, 2009 as part of the consent agenda. Councilor David Brown asked for it to be removed and considered by the Council as a whole. As a result, Walden made a staff report explaining the Planning Commission's conversation.

Councilor Brown said he wanted another public discussion given the close vote by the Planning Commission, as well as the absence that night by two Commissioners. Brown said he thought requiring kitchens and bathrooms in each unit may be creating something different than what was envisioned when SROs first entered the public conversation on homelessness.

"The early discussions we had about this were not about the SRO becoming a vehicle to self-sufficiency," Brown said. "[They were] to address a pressing housing need. And that pressing housing need was seen to argue for having the option to create units without the [kitchen and bath] requirement." Brown said he wanted to see flexibility in the zoning code allowing for other SRO developers beyond VSH.

On the matter of kitchens and bathrooms, Norris said that while VSH is proposing building units with those features and that the City did not need to enshrine their business model in the zoning code. He said he could live with flexibility. Councilors Holly Edwards, Satyendra Huja and Julian Taliaferro all said they wanted kitchens and baths to be required for each unit.

Councilor Huja said he wanted the ordinance to be changed to allow SRO facilities to be built in the UMD and UHD districts. Jim Tolbert, the City's Director of Neighborhood Development Services, said he had a lot of concern with that idea.

"I can see some of our creative developers using this to circumvent the density regulations and put more units in a place than we intended, and they'd have nothing to do with the homeless," Tolbert said. Council eventually sided with Tolbert, and for now, SRO facilities will not be permitted in the University districts.

The second reading and adoption of the SRO ordinance will come back on the consent agenda for the meeting on July 20, 2009.