

VIRGINIA HOUSING

By Chris Thompson

Shaping the future of our communities: Zoning, land use, and Virginia Housing's support



IN RECENT YEARS, demand for homes across Virginia has continued to rise, as have the costs of owning or renting one. At the same time, supply has struggled to keep up. One critical part of addressing housing affordability is understanding the role that zoning and land use play in shaping communities.

At Virginia Housing, the state's housing finance agency, both zoning and land use are central to our work to expand and preserve the supply of affordable housing statewide. When policymakers and housing professionals are clear on how their zoning ordinances allow and restrict various ways of using land in their communities, they are better positioned to address their housing needs. More broadly, understanding how residential, commercial, recreational, and other land uses fit together is essential for attracting jobs, staying economically competitive, and improving overall quality of life.

Virginia Housing has provided grant funding to numerous localities seeking to use their land more effectively — both to address housing challenges and to advance broader goals for vibrant, resilient communities. As you read about these projects, we encourage you to think big about your own community's needs. Virginia Housing is always eager to discuss ideas and opportunities for partnership, even in early stages.

The Virginia Zoning Atlas

Zoning can be a complicated subject. Early zoning codes were relatively short and straightforward, but that is no longer the case. Across Virginia's 357 jurisdictions, there are more than 4,000 zoning districts and roughly 50,000 pages of zoning code. The average code alone is nearly 175 pages!



Presenting findings from the Virginia Zoning Atlas. Courtesy of HousingForward Virginia.

Fortunately, Virginia's localities now have a powerful new tool for breaking this information into more digestible insights: the Virginia Zoning Atlas, an interactive map that visualizes zoning code details for nearly every locality in the state. Atlas users can zoom from the national map down to specific cities and counties, where they'll find information about permitted housing types, minimum lot sizes, and parking requirements. The atlas also includes data on protected land, flood zones, green space, transit access, and more.

By bringing this information together in one searchable online tool, the Virginia Zoning Atlas gives users a clear picture of both the current realities and future possibilities for land use in their community. This information gives decision-makers far more insight into how zoning might evolve to meet local goals.

The Virginia Zoning Atlas was created by HousingForward Virginia, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research and policy organization focused on housing issues. HousingForward Virginia partnered with the National Zoning Atlas to develop the tool, and their effort benefited from the support of a broad public private collaboration. Funding came from Capital One's Community Impact and Investment Division, \$185,000 in grants from Virginia Housing, and contributions from the Mercatus Center at George Mason University, the Bob and Anna Lou Schaberg Foundation, the Hampton Roads Community Foundation, the Community Foundation for a Greater Richmond, the League of Women Voters of Virginia, Sentara Health, Atlantic Union Bank, Fulton Forward Foundation, and Wells Fargo.

"As we all know, health, educational, and economic outcomes directly correlate to housing. The Virginia Zoning Atlas empowers lawmakers to make informed decisions about zoning policies in the



The Virginia Zoning Atlas is available at ZoningAtlas.org/Virginia.

future. Now, policymakers and decision-makers across Virginia will be able to visualize the impact zoning has on housing development and our communities more broadly,” said HousingForward Virginia Executive Director of Programs Jonathan Knopf when the final map was unveiled in late 2025.

Explore the Virginia Zoning Atlas at ZoningAtlas.org/Virginia or use the QR code.



The ZONED OUT campaign

Complementing the Virginia Zoning Atlas is ZONED OUT, an outreach and education campaign from HousingForward Virginia designed to help local governments and community groups put the Atlas to work in their own backyards. Available both in person and virtually, ZONED OUT offers a menu of options tailored to the needs of each partner, from introductions to zoning fundamentals to deeper dives that incorporate real-world local data and scenarios.

Since the program’s debut in February, HousingForward Virginia has conducted seven ZONED OUT events: two in Richmond and one each in Chesapeake, Virginia Beach, and Warrenton, as well two virtual sessions. While ZONED OUT sessions are tailored to each community or organization, the core goal remains the same: helping Virginians understand how to expand housing choices, both in where they live and in the types of homes available. Sessions review demographic trends, such as shifting family sizes, age distributions, and the gap between starter home demand and construction. They also explore how information from the Virginia Zoning Atlas can be used to address local housing challenges.

Although ZONED OUT is housing-focused, HousingForward Virginia has also delivered sessions to organizations working in related fields, including transportation, environmental conservation, and economic development.

“Zoning is something that local governments can exercise a lot of discretion within Virginia,” said Knopf. “However, very few of us were taught about zoning and land use in school. With the Zoning Atlas and ZONED OUT, we really want to make those tools accessible. The goal is that we leave decision-makers better equipped to have productive conversations with their constituents and neighbors about what their neighborhoods will look like in one year, five years, 50 years.”

Learn more about ZONED OUT at HousingForwardVA.org/Zoned-Out or use the QR code.



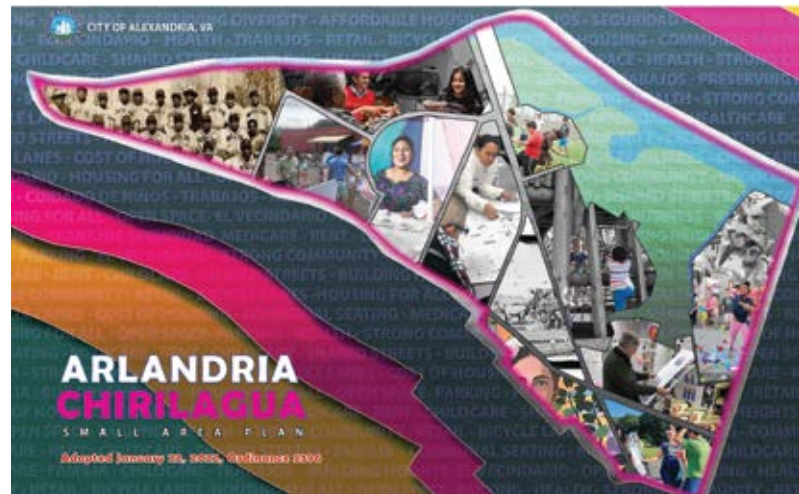
Community Impact Grants and support for communities

Beyond the statewide Virginia Zoning Atlas, Virginia Housing has partnered with localities and regional organizations to address the intersection of land use and housing. This work ranges from property inventories and feasibility studies to reviews of local policies and zoning ordinances, as well as data analysis that helps identify housing inventory needs and strategies for filling the gaps.

A key resource Virginia Housing uses to support these efforts are Community Impact Grants, which can support the costs of market research, design and engineering studies, community outreach, neighborhood design, mixed-use and mixed-income development planning, and other initiatives that foster housing and economic growth. These grants have been implemented in communities across the Commonwealth for an array of needs, but all with one common goal: to increase attainable, affordable housing for all Virginians.

City of Alexandria: South Patrick Street Housing Affordability Strategy and Arlandria Chirilagua Small Area Plan

Alexandria is one of Virginia’s leaders in zoning and land use innovation. Although the city has a large and diverse housing stock, affordability has declined for years as developers have acquired and converted affordable units into market rate housing. While many of these older, modest units have remained relatively affordable because of their age and condition, pressure for higher-end renovations has intensified. Because demand for housing at all income levels is high, subsidies alone cannot meet Alexandria’s needs. Increasing density, paired with strong affordability requirements, has become a central strategy.



Alexandria’s Arlandria Chirilagua Small Area Plan. Courtesy of the City of Alexandria.

The South Patrick Street Housing Affordability Strategy exemplifies this approach. The area included 215 garden and townhouse units under a single owner, with affordability subsidies set to expire. Concerned about the likelihood of redevelopment and conversion to market rate, city leaders created a new residential multifamily (RMF) zone that offered enough density to make preserving affordable units financially viable for the property owner.

Virginia Housing supported this effort by providing grant funding for planning activities ranging from traffic and utility analyses to urban design considerations. Another important component was a community-centered engagement process designed to reflect the perspectives and needs of residents living in the affordable units. The South Patrick Street Housing Affordability Strategy ultimately won a national Urban Land Institute award, underscoring its economic feasibility and inclusive approach.

The city saw a second major project with the arrival of Amazon’s second headquarters in nearby Crystal City. The Arlandria Chirilagua Small Area Plan was part of Alexandria’s desire to preserve affordability along the Mt. Vernon Avenue corridor, an area with many affordable units and vibrant retail, as well as sites capable of supporting greater density.

Working with the community and landowners, planners developed a system of height bonuses tied to affordability commitments. These bonuses, which allow for significantly taller buildings, have become powerful incentives for preserving affordable units. Robust community outreach was essential as most Arlandria Chirilagua residents earn well below the area’s median income.

Under the plan, developers can build up to twice the height permitted under existing zoning if affordable units are included. Without this plan, the affordable housing stock might have increased only mod-

Conceptual development rendering from the Franklin County Housing Assessment. Courtesy of Franklin County.



estly while the region's overall affordable stock declined. Instead, affordability commitments are now secured, and the plan won the American Planning Association's Virginia Plan of the Year award for its technical strength and focus on equity and inclusion, as well as a Virginia Governor's Housing Conference award in November of last year.

Franklin County: Franklin County Housing Assessment

In a more rural part of the state, Virginia Housing supported the Franklin County Housing Assessment, which aimed to expand both the supply and diversity of housing options. Also known as a development code analysis, the assessment examined regulatory, permitting, and cost barriers that can limit the creation of desired housing types. Its goal was to ensure that the county's codes and ordinances align with the housing vision established through earlier planning efforts.

Many communities articulate strong goals for expanding housing affordability, but unless their development codes support those goals, achieving them can be difficult or even impossible. In Franklin County, this challenge was especially relevant in Union Hall, a rural area of the county where they had previously adopted a small area plan calling for more housing types and increased density. The housing assessment led to specific recommendations, including the creation of a zoning district tailored to Union Hall's blend of agricultural and residential uses and an overlay district permitting duplexes, triplexes, townhomes, and other housing types consistent with the small area plan.

City of Roanoke: Riverdale Conceptual Plan

Riverdale is a neighborhood in southeast Roanoke along the Roanoke River and at the base of Mill Mountain. Its 125 acres are comparable in size to the city's downtown. Formerly an industrial hub, the area has declined significantly since jobs began leaving in the late 50s, and today, the area's poverty rate is much higher than that of the surrounding area, while property and home values are much lower.

The Riverdale Conceptual Plan is an effort to reimagine Riverdale as an anchor for southeast Roanoke, complete with residential, office, retail, dining, and light industrial space. Virginia Housing has

Rendering of Riverdale Conceptual Plan in the City of Roanoke. Courtesy Poole and Poole Architecture.



supported the city of Roanoke's efforts to gain insight from Roanoke residents on the future Riverdale redevelopment, as well as the development of both a market study to understand how space in Riverdale might be used and a feasibility study to consider what kinds of uses might be possible. Information collected in each of these endeavors is currently being used to guide revitalization efforts in Riverdale.

Let's solve this together!

Strong communities don't happen by accident. From the Virginia Zoning Atlas and ZONED OUT campaign to locality-focused land use planning efforts, the work highlighted here shows what becomes possible when leaders take a strategic look at how their zoning and land use policies shape housing opportunities. From large cities to small rural communities, thoughtful planning can enhance neighborhood quality, foster long-term economic strength, and address the housing crisis.

Virginia Housing is proud to support these efforts. If your community is exploring a land use or housing initiative, we welcome the opportunity to collaborate. Please visit VirginiaHousing.com or email Grants@VirginiaHousing.com to start the conversation.

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