Build It, or *Protect* It?

Two Asheville council votes decided whether the city would change the zoning rules behind its housing shortage, and began to settle who gets protected while it does. A pledge to protect residents passed on July 28, and the zoning changes on August 25.

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THE QUESTION

For years the story of Asheville's housing shortage has been told as history: the homes that urban renewal bulldozed, the land that was never given back. That part is settled. The open question is what the city does next. In July and August 2026 the city made two decisions that began to answer it.

Together they shape how much housing gets built and where. One is a promise to protect the neighborhoods most at risk of being priced out. The other is a package of changes to the zoning rules that had quietly kept most of the city to a single house on a single lot, apart from a small extra home. The fight was never really about whether to do both. It's about how the two fit together. The promise came first, but only the zoning changes have become law.

JULY AND AUGUST 2026

Two votes, four weeks *apart*

On July 28 the council adopted an anti-displacement resolution, a formal pledge that the city will protect existing residents as it grows. It's not a law by itself. In June the city attorney said the council should research what a resolution like this gives staff its marching orders, and that staff will bring something back.

On August 25 came the one with teeth. The council took up a package of zoning changes drawn from a study the city commissioned back in 2023. It voted on the package as three separate motions and approved all three. The rule forcing new housing to come with off-street parking is gone. Duplexes are now an allowed primary use in every residential district and in certain mixed-use ones. Accessory dwelling units, the small extra homes on the same lot as a house, can be larger. And one is now allowed on a lot that already holds a duplex, so a single lot can carry three homes. These are small buildings, the kind that used to be normal on an ordinary street. The industry calls them the missing middle: the housing that sits between a single house and a large apartment building. Most American cities stopped allowing this kind of housing decades ago.

The package also leaves some housing out. The city describes what it adopted as permitting duplexes citywide, adding flexibility for accessory dwelling units, and removing minimum off-street parking requirements. A single building with three or four homes isn't on that list, though the 2023 study recommended them.

Separately, state law was about to bar the city's parking minimums. House Bill 162 was ratified on July 1, 2026, and signed into law that month. It says a North Carolina local government can't require an off-street parking lot to meet a minimum number of spaces per development or structure, whatever the use. The one exception is for local governments in the state's coastal area, and Asheville isn't in it. The ban doesn't take effect until January 1, 2027. So on parking, the council moved about four months ahead of a rule it was going to have to follow anyway.

Jul 28
Council adopted the anti-displacement resolution, as amended.

Aug 25
Council approved the missing-middle zoning changes, in three separate motions.

2023
Year the city's own missing-middle study was finished.

THE RULES ON THE GROUND

The shortage the city *wrote into law*

When the city's missing-middle study came out in 2023, about two-thirds of Asheville's neighborhoods allowed only single-family homes. That figure is the city's own. In most of the city, a duplex was illegal to build. So was a townhome or a triplex. It didn't matter what they cost or who wanted them. The zoning code made them illegal.

That's the quiet half of the shortage. The homes urban renewal tore down are gone, and we tell that story in The Shortage Was Made Here. But until August 2026, on the empty and underused land still left in the city, the rules mostly allowed one detached house per lot. That's the most land-hungry form of housing there is, and often the most expensive. Those rules helped keep housing scarce, and scarce housing is expensive housing.

The city has known this for years. It loosened a few of those rules in 2015 and 2017. Its 2023 missing-middle study said plainly what to change. In March 2025 the council took a first step toward those changes. It eased the standards for cottage developments and flag lots, except in parts of the city's historically Black legacy neighborhoods. It eased some rules for housing along transit corridors, and it dropped minimum parking for new housing along those corridors and in mixed-use districts. That step was real, but it was a fraction of what the study called for. The August 25 vote went much further, though not all the way.

How much housing is missing isn't a mystery. From 2024 to 2029, a regional housing assessment says, Asheville alone needs about 6,441 more rental homes and 5,217 more to buy. Those homes are part of the roughly 34,358 the four-county region needs over the same five years. The widest rental gap is at the bottom, for families earning under half the area's median income. Meanwhile the median home sale price in Buncombe County was about $500,000 in May 2026. A family earning 120 percent of the area's median income could afford about $372,000.

2.9%
Share of Asheville homes that are in duplexes. Single-family homes are 60.5 percent.

6,441
More rental homes Asheville needs over five years, plus 5,217 for sale.

$500K
Buncombe County median home sale price, May 2026. A family earning 120 percent of the area's median income can afford about $372K.

What the zoning changes will add is harder to pin down. The city never put a number on it. In Minneapolis, the first big city to end single-family-only zoning, only about 2.55 duplex and triplex homes were built in the two and a half years after that. Making this housing legal is a necessary step, but that alone won't get it built.

THE DISAGREEMENT

The fight is about what comes *first*

If almost everyone agrees the city needs more housing, why is this hard? Because of who paid the price the last time Asheville rebuilt itself, and who is afraid of paying it again.

The legacy neighborhoods, as the city calls them, are the most worried. They include Shiloh, Burton Street, Southside and the East End. These are the places urban renewal and redlining hit hardest, and where rising prices and property tax bills have helped push longtime residents out. Their fear is simple. Change the zoning to invite new housing, and the builders go to the blocks where land is still cheap. Those are their blocks, and the people already there get priced out first.

That fear isn't just talk. In May 2026 the council voted down a 100-unit affordable housing project in Shiloh, in part because of displacement concerns. One member said she felt hyperprotective of the neighborhood. Sekou Coleman, who coordinates the Legacy Neighborhoods Coalition, wanted the zoning to wait: first put in place more protections and the anti-displacement tool the city is building, and only then loosen the rules.

The pro-housing side, organized as Asheville for All, reads the same history and draws the opposite lesson. A lead organizer, Andy Paul, argues that the way you protect a neighborhood from a single giant development is to let modest housing be built everywhere, so no one block absorbs all the pressure. Allow a little more housing broadly, the argument goes, and you are less likely to get a tower dropped into Shiloh.

The city is trying to walk a line between them. The tool it's building is called the Displacement Risk Assessment Tool. For a given address, it would show how much risk of displacement the surrounding neighborhood might face. It would use measures such as renter cost burden, rising home values, and median household income. But the city is careful to say the tool would only give data to the people making the decisions, and it wouldn't stop a project on its own.

WEIGHING THE TRADE-OFF

Both sides are describing a *real risk*

Each side is pointing at something true, and neither one is a villain.

The evidence on supply is not really in doubt. A large body of research finds that cities that allow more housing ease their cost pressure over time better than cities that don't. Loosening the rules is no instant fix. By itself it tends to add housing at the higher end first, so it's slow, and it works best with subsidies. But the direction is clear.

One more limit: zoning isn't the whole story. On the page for the missing-middle study, the city blames Asheville's prices partly on tourism and second-home buyers. About 5,400 short-term rentals were listed across Buncombe County in 2024. Since 2018 the city has prohibited short-term rentals of a whole house in most of Asheville outside its resort zoning district. We follow the tourism money separately in The Tax No One Can Count. These zoning changes won't touch any of that. Zoning is one of the things that determine what a home costs here, and it's one the council controls.

On the other side, there's a real risk of displacement. Even though more housing tends to ease rents across a city as a whole, new construction on cheap land near the center of a hot market can push longtime residents out. Asheville has pushed people out of the legacy neighborhoods before. A promise to protect them, with no tool and no funding behind it, is the kind of promise this city has broken in living memory. So it wasn't obstruction to ask for the protection to be real and funded, and adopted alongside the zoning instead of left as a promise.

Housing money was on the ballot, but it was the county's, not the city's. On November 3, 2026, Buncombe County voters approved two general-obligation bonds, letting the county borrow up to $40 million for affordable housing and $30 million for open space. The county puts the cost of both, with interest, at about $111.1 million over 20 years. It estimates the tax increase at about $43 a year on a home worth $446,000. The county calls that its median sale price, and it's lower than the May 2026 median we gave earlier. The county isn't the city, and a county bond doesn't buy the anti-displacement protections this fight is about. But the ballot was the closest thing to a direct vote on whether people here would pay for housing. The zoning had already changed.

Changing the zoning was the right thing to do. The city did it while the protection was still only a promise. That's how the same neighborhoods get hurt all over again. The protection didn't have to come first, as long as it was funded and in force when the rules changed. It was not in force. What's still open is how the council's two votes fit together.

WHAT IT MEANS HERE

What actually *passed*

July 28, the resolution. The council approved it, as amended. The city's own account of it describes a commitment and a framework: identify the neighborhoods most vulnerable to displacement, then build strategies that balance new housing against keeping current residents in place and preserving neighborhood identity. That account doesn't mention any money. The council did fund something that night: a home repair program paid from the city's 2026 housing bond. Staff expects the program to serve 68 to 108 low-income families. The program is real, but it's narrower than the resolution's promise.

August 25, the zoning. All three motions passed: parking, duplexes and accessory dwelling units. Dropping the parking requirement matters because that one rule can determine whether the numbers work for a small building. A state ban on parking minimums still takes effect on January 1, 2027. The city's list of zoning amendments shows the changes taking effect on August 25, 2026. Its account of the meeting doesn't mention exempting any neighborhood or phasing the changes in.

THE TAKEAWAY

Do them *together*, or repeat the old mistake.

Asheville built its housing shortage partly with a zoning code that made modest homes illegal across most of the city. In 2015 and 2017 it eased its rules on accessory dwelling unit size and lot dimensions, and in March 2025 it eased others. The city had two moves to make: change the rules so housing can get built, and protect the neighborhoods that have been bulldozed for progress before. Both are right, and the answer is to do them together, with the protection funded and in force, not just promised. Changing the rules without the protection in force would repeat the city's old mistake in the same neighborhoods. Two votes, four weeks apart, began to settle the fight. Both passed. The zoning changes are law now, and the broad protection is still only a promise.

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