

[The Link apartments would be a net positive for Harrisonburg](#)

Student housing vs. affordable housing • Alignment with the Downtown 2040 Plan • Unbundling rent from parking

[Brent Finnegan](#)

Aug 07, 2025

Last month city staff and Harrisonburg Planning Commission unanimously recommended approval of the rezoning request for [The Link](#) apartment development. The request will go before City Council on Tuesday, August 12. I've received several questions about The Link from friends, coworkers, and neighbors, so it's worth reviewing here.



PROPOSED HOUSING DEVELOPMENT PROJECT | 473 S. MAIN STREET | HARRISONBURG VA
INTERSECTION OF S. MAIN STREET & PROPOSED PAUL STREET EXTENSION

05 | 30 | 2025

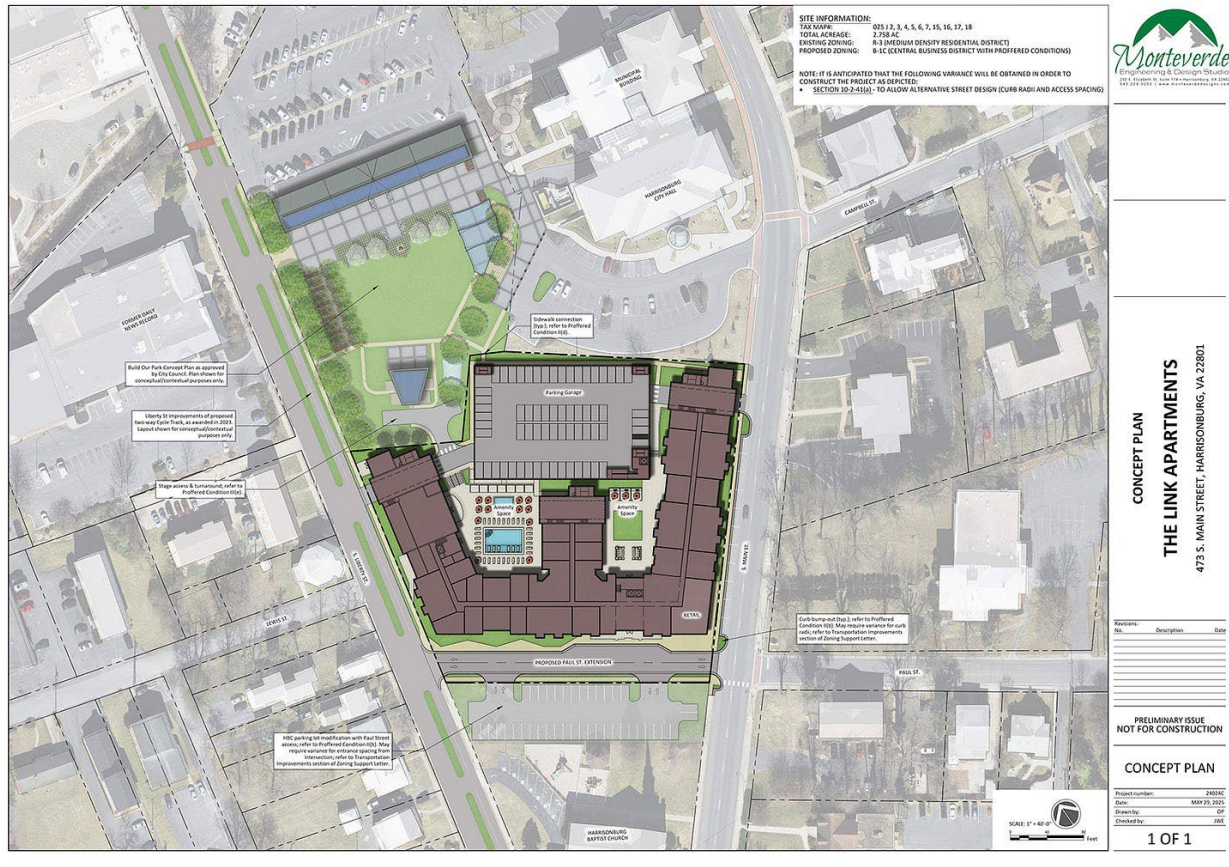
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EXHIBIT 8



The Link is proposed to be built on the site of [Lindsey Funeral Home](#) just south of City Hall on S. Main Street. The development would border on Liberty Street and include an extension of Paul Street west to connect Paul to Liberty.

The property is currently zoned [R-3](#) (medium density residential) but zero people live on the 10 lots that comprise this site. Why is a funeral home zoned R-3 residential? I'm not entirely sure, but from the research I've done, these lots on the south end of downtown were zoned R-3 in 1977, when the population of Harrisonburg was [19,100](#). Townhouses are among the [by-right](#) uses for R-3, which include a [required minimum number of off-street parking spaces](#).



The last time a large apartment building approaching this scale was built downtown was in 2008, when [Urban Exchange](#) was constructed on the site of a former car dealership. For comparison, Urban Exchange is a 4-over-1 (four floors of residential over one floor of commercial) with 194 housing units, while The Link is a 5-over-1 with up to 265 housing units.

The most common objections to The Link I've encountered are some combination of "it's too big," and "it's ugly." In the U.S., developments deemed ugly typically only face public opposition when they are high-density residential developments. I'd argue [massive parking lots are ugly](#), but parking lots do not illicit the sort of organized public opposition we're seeing against The Link because parking lots house cars, not people. If we genuinely valued housing for people over car storage, we wouldn't have density maximums and parking minimums riddled throughout our zoning and subdivision ordinances.

One reason The Link looks like many other new, large apartment buildings across North America is the [multiple stair requirement in the state building code](#). The state building code and the local zoning ordinance are separate regulatory documents: there are two counties (and temporarily, [one city](#)) in Virginia that have no zoning ordinance at all, but developers in those zoning-free municipalities still must abide by the [Virginia Uniform Statewide Building Code](#) (USBC), which is based on the [2021 International Building Code](#), published by the [International Code Council](#).

Practically all new 4-over-1 and 5-over-1 apartment buildings look the same because each wing of the building is required to have two sets of stairs. There are [reform efforts](#) underway in Virginia to allow [point access block](#) (i.e. single stair) buildings, but the USBC has [not yet been updated](#) to allow for alternate stairway configurations.



View of downtown Harrisonburg facing north in front of City Hall.

The objection that The Link is “too tall” honestly strikes me as a bit odd, considering the tallest building downtown is a grain elevator. Many of the older buildings downtown that were built before the era of height restrictions have [parapet façades](#) that served no purpose other than to make those buildings look taller. I’d prefer that the tallest buildings in the heart of our city be used for housing humans rather than storing animal feed.

Student housing vs. affordable housing

Another objection to The Link is that it’s not affordable housing, and that it’s for JMU students. I’ve written at length about [why affordable housing is a challenge, and what Harrisonburg can do about it](#) in our zoning ordinance. To my knowledge, there are no developers currently lined up to build affordable housing on this site if this request is denied. If turned down by City Council, these lots will continue to house neither students nor townies.

When Urban Exchange was built, the intended market was condos for young professionals (*Daily News Record*, May 24, 2010) but today Urban Exchange rents to a significant number of JMU students. I believe [Timberwolf](#), the developer of The Link, has made a good faith effort to create a development that acknowledges the realities of the downtown housing market while also leaving flexibility for non-students. The developer has [proffered](#) that a maximum of 40% of the apartments will be 4-bedroom apartments, and at least 25% of the apartments will be studio or one bedroom units. The [2021 housing study](#) identified the need for studio apartments, as they only make up 2% of the total rental units in the city.

The Strong Towns approach to avoiding [sudden intensification](#) is to allow for all types of housing in the zoning ordinance, including basement apartments, backyard cottages, and multiplexes. Unfortunately Harrisonburg has made little headway on the [zoning and subdivision ordinances update](#) over the past 5 years. I have reason to doubt that the majority of homeowners opposed to this rezoning will show up in support of citywide zoning reforms that would allow for this sort of missing middle housing.

Alignment with the Downtown 2040 Plan

Harrisonburg's [Downtown 2040 Plan](#) was published in December 2021, the result of months of public input and committee work that included insights and contributions of more than 500 people. The plan has several sections, and here I'll focus on what it says about housing and parking.

"Much of Downtown's residential growth has been accommodated through the conversion of older buildings into residential lofts. However, Downtown is running out of old buildings to reuse, and **new approaches are needed to create more housing Downtown . . . More residential density is needed** to help Downtown feel more like a neighborhood and to support local businesses." (Page 16)

Specifically, the plan states that we need new housing density in *south* downtown.

"While there are potential **opportunities to develop housing** across Downtown, there are two areas where there are **clusters of underutilized property ripe for reinvestment**. Both of these areas are around the existing City-controlled parking decks that are in need of redevelopment. Redevelopment in these two pockets of Downtown alone could bring 580 new homes to Downtown." (Page 59)



The site of The Link is circled in red in this Downtown 2040 Plan map. The yellow highlights indicate areas where high density housing is desired. (Page 59)

Another area of focus in the 2040 Plan is car parking. Page 20 states, "**we have to dedicate space for cars and parking, which contributes to limited opportunities to build new housing.**" The authors of the plan underscored the need to rebuild the Water Street and Elizabeth Street parking decks. But demolishing and [rebuilding the Water Street deck alone would cost upwards of \\$15 million](#). Where would that funding come from, and how might parking be shifted to other locations during that redevelopment process?

The developer of The Link has proffered that they would enter into a parking agreement with the city to reserve up to 65 parking spaces in the 400-plus space parking garage for municipal and/or public use at well below the true costs of structured car parking spaces ([\\$30,000 per space](#)). An obvious source of revenue to redevelop the public parking decks would be to [stop subsidizing personal property storage](#) on public land, and create a [parking benefit district](#) for downtown funded by parking fees. An alternative (or additional) source of funding could be property tax revenue from new developments downtown, such as The Link.

I made the chart below based on the best estimates I could find for three scenarios; the property as it currently exists, if The Link were to get built, and if it were to get developed by-right as townhomes. These are ballpark estimates for housing, tax revenue, and parking for the purposes of comparison.

	EXISTING	THE LINK	BY-RIGHT DEVELOPMENT
HOUSING	0 residential units	Up to 265 residential units	25 to 32 residential units
TAX REVENUE	\$24K (est.)	\$550K to \$600K (est.)	\$100K to \$150K (est.)
PARKING	Funeral home surface lot	400+ space deck (65 public/muni)	Private parking for townhomes

In last month’s Planning Commission meeting, I ultimately agreed with the concluding recommendation from city staff in the July staff report:

“Staff believes **rezoning the property to B-1C has more advantages than any disadvantages** and it generally **conforms with the City’s Comprehensive Plan and the Harrisonburg Downtown 2040 plan.**”

Unbundling rent from parking

I’ve read criticisms that the parking deck—a minimum of 400 spaces—is too big. Others have said there won’t be enough parking for the residents. Either way, the size and/or placement of parking deck is a sticking point for some. But placing the deck on the south side of the development would mean it would front onto Main Street, which would do nothing to assuage concerns about the first thing people see as they drive north on Main Street. Surface parking lots are a problem for reasons spelled out on pages 20 and 21 of the [2040 plan](#). Structured parking (garages or decks) takes up less land, but is also [much more expensive to build](#).



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NW BIRDSEYE VIEW

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An easily overlooked detail of this request is that The Link plans to charge separately for rent and for parking. 473 S. Main Street is within walking and biking distance to campus. Considering students are already charged a [nominal fee to park on campus](#), getting an additional charge to park at home will be all the more incentive to arrive in Harrisonburg without a car.

A few months ago I voted against a rezoning request for a [student housing development at the top of Port Republic Road](#)—not because it had too many housing units, but due to its the number of car parking spaces that were proposed to be built and bundled together with the rent. We need (and [residents want](#)) fewer apartment buildings where the rent is bundled together with parking and more apartments that charge separately for rent and parking, which is why I've been advocating for [removing parking requirements from Harrisonburg's zoning ordinance](#).

Putting hundreds of more cars on city streets is a concern I genuinely share with many of the opponents of The Link. It's also why developing this as R-3 with its off-street parking requirements would make matters worse (and wouldn't add any public or municipal parking to the block). To [quote](#)

[Henry Grabar](#)

, “If your primary concern is traffic, and your primary request is parking, you need to understand that those things are at cross-purposes.”

The character of the neighborhood

The majority of the opposition to The Link is coming from residents of Old Town. In the early aughts, some residents of Old Town organized to create the most restrictive zoning district in the city: [U-R \(urban residential\)](#).

New Zoning Proposed For Old Town District

By **ANDREW SCOT BOLSINGER**

News-Record Staff Writer

In the Old Town section of Harrisonburg, deep divisions are evident between residents and people who rent their homes to college students.

But, perhaps if six people who are heavily invested emotionally and financially in the area can come together and find consensus, then hope for the rest of the neighborhood remains.

At least that's what members of the Old Town Committee are betting on. The committee, formed by the Harrisonburg Department of Community Planning at the request of the City Council, will hold a public meeting on Aug. 15 for input on its new proposed zoning ordinances for the downtown neighborhood.

Comprised of three homeowners, three rental property owners and planning commissioner Robert Steere, the committee has met for months to

Proposed Rezoning in Old Town Harrisonburg



News-Record Graphic by Dustin Blyer

hash out deep divisions within the neighborhood. Homeowners had nearly won approval to

See ZONING, Page 10

Headline about downzoning Old Town from the Daily News-Record, July 26, 2001.

The purpose of U-R was ostensibly to stop college party houses from dominating the neighborhood. If you've been in Old Town when JMU is in session, you may have noticed there are still loud parties in this area. Those houses have held on to their pre-2001 [nonconforming status](#), and continue to host raucous parties a quarter of a century later. It's entirely possible that the students who will be hosting big parties in Old Town later this month are the children of students who played beer pong in Old Town in the late 90s and early aughts.

There is no alternative proposal from a developer for this site currently on the table. If the funeral home property were to eventually get redeveloped by-right (without a rezoning) as R-3, I believe the most likely outcome would be townhouses, similar to [developments along Port Republic Road](#). Without significant federal subsidies, those would *not* be “[affordable](#)” or workforce housing, and the most likely tenants of new townhomes within walking distance to Bluestone campus would be JMU students. And if those townhomes are unmanaged like many other college townhome developments in the city and Rockingham County, [there will be loud parties](#). Managed apartment buildings like Urban Exchange and [865 East](#) tend not to have those same sorts of issues with parties.

In 2008 [Urban Exchange was built by-right](#) on land zoned [B-1](#), across E. Water Street from Old Town properties zoned U-R. Because apartments are a by-right use in B-1, **there was no need for a rezoning or a public hearing to approve Urban Exchange**. If that property had been zoned something other than B-1 and needed a rezoning, it’s hard to imagine that we wouldn’t have seen the same sort of opposition to Urban Exchange that we’re seeing with The Link today.



As

[Jerusalem Demsas](#)

[put it](#), “Support and opposition for new housing is largely predicated on how you feel about cities to begin with.” I am of the view that [Harrisonburg is indeed a legitimate city](#), and therefore developments like The Link not only belong downtown—they are necessary for downtown’s survival and evolution. The responsibility of creating affordable housing falls to all of us to advocate for legalizing [affordable housing types](#) throughout the city by changing the zoning ordinance.

I believe Harrisonburg needs dense, walkable housing more than we need a funeral home and more than we need townhouses on this block. The Link would be a net positive for downtown. Harrisonburg is a city. It should act like one.

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By Brent Finnegan · Launched 2 years ago

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