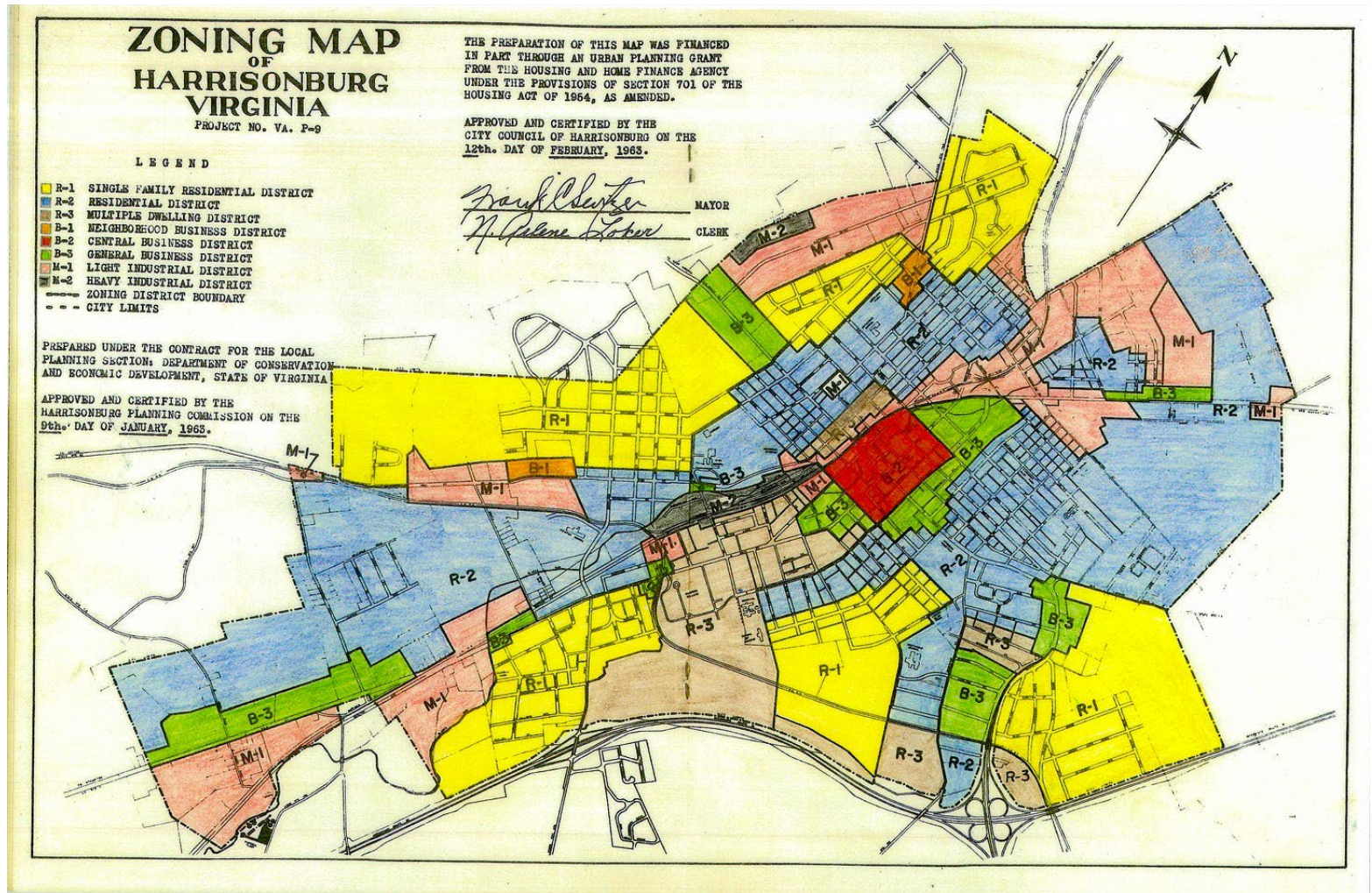


Zoning rules are not a constant

Harrisonburg's zoning ordinance and map has changed many times over the decades. A brief look at the history of land use at the site of The Link proposal in south downtown Harrisonburg.

[Brent Finnegan](#)

Aug 12, 2025



Harrisonburg zoning map from 1963.

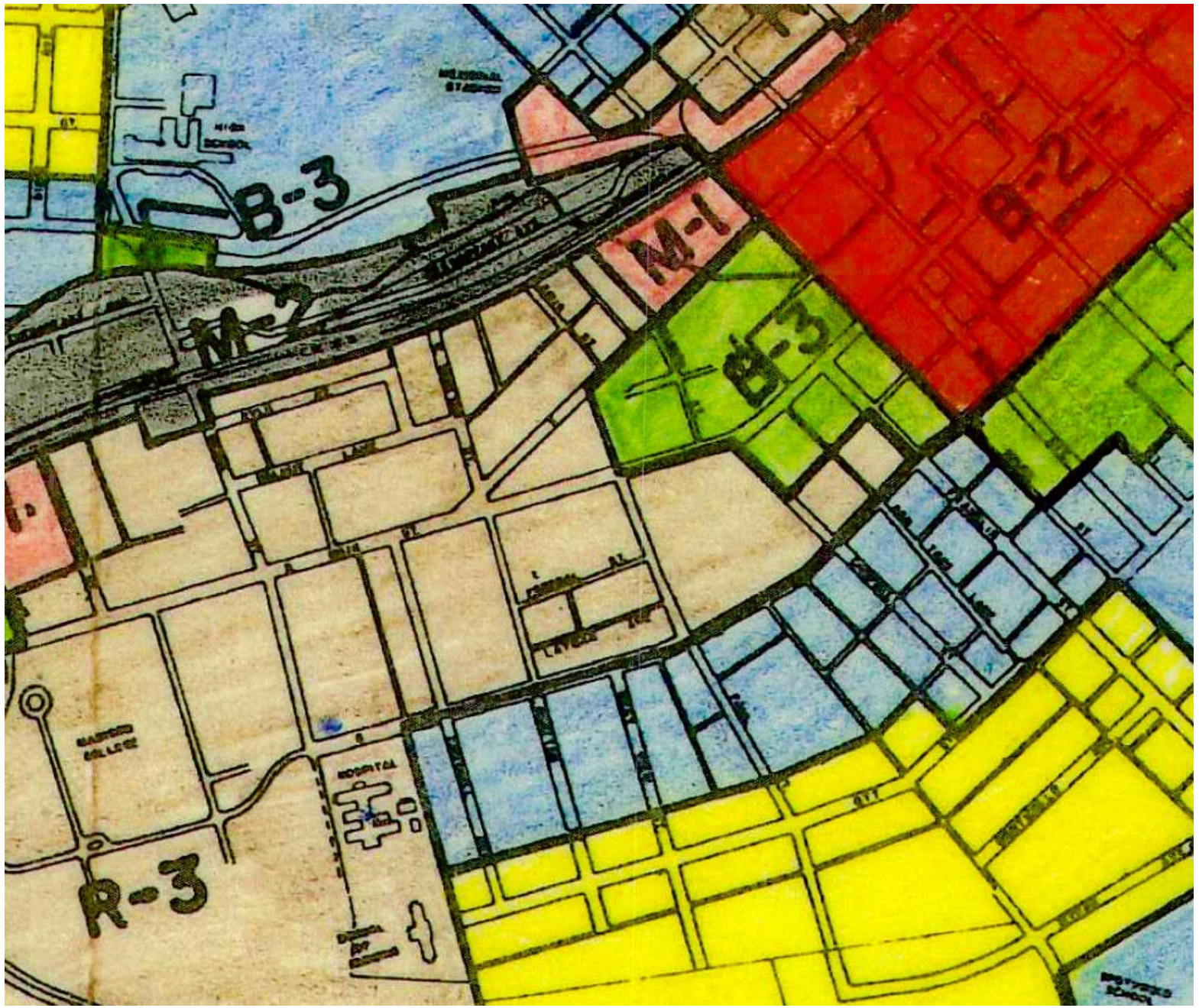
In the debate over whether Harrisonburg City Council should approve or deny a request to rezone several lots on the southern end of downtown from R-3 (medium density residential) to B-1 (central business district), I've read pleas to [keep the property R-3](#). There are yard signs all over Old Town that say "NO to B-1C," as if B-1 itself were a scourge rather than simply the [zoning designation for most of downtown](#) (the C indicates there are conditions). In the push to preserve the R-3 designation, the history and intent of R-3 itself is worth a closer look. Thanks to city staff who answered my seemingly random questions about this.

To the extent that people know about land use policies, a common narrative about why we need zoning usually involves keeping housing away from noxious industrial uses. If you've ever walked or biked by the houses near the intersection of [Liberty and Washington](#), you may have noticed those houses are not protected from industrial poultry plant smells. In my experience, [Euclidean zoning](#) is much more effective at keeping apartments away from

single-family neighborhoods than it is at keeping factories away from housing in general. The [2021 housing study](#) found that Harrisonburg “prohibits multi-family development for over 80% of the jurisdictional area” (page 98).

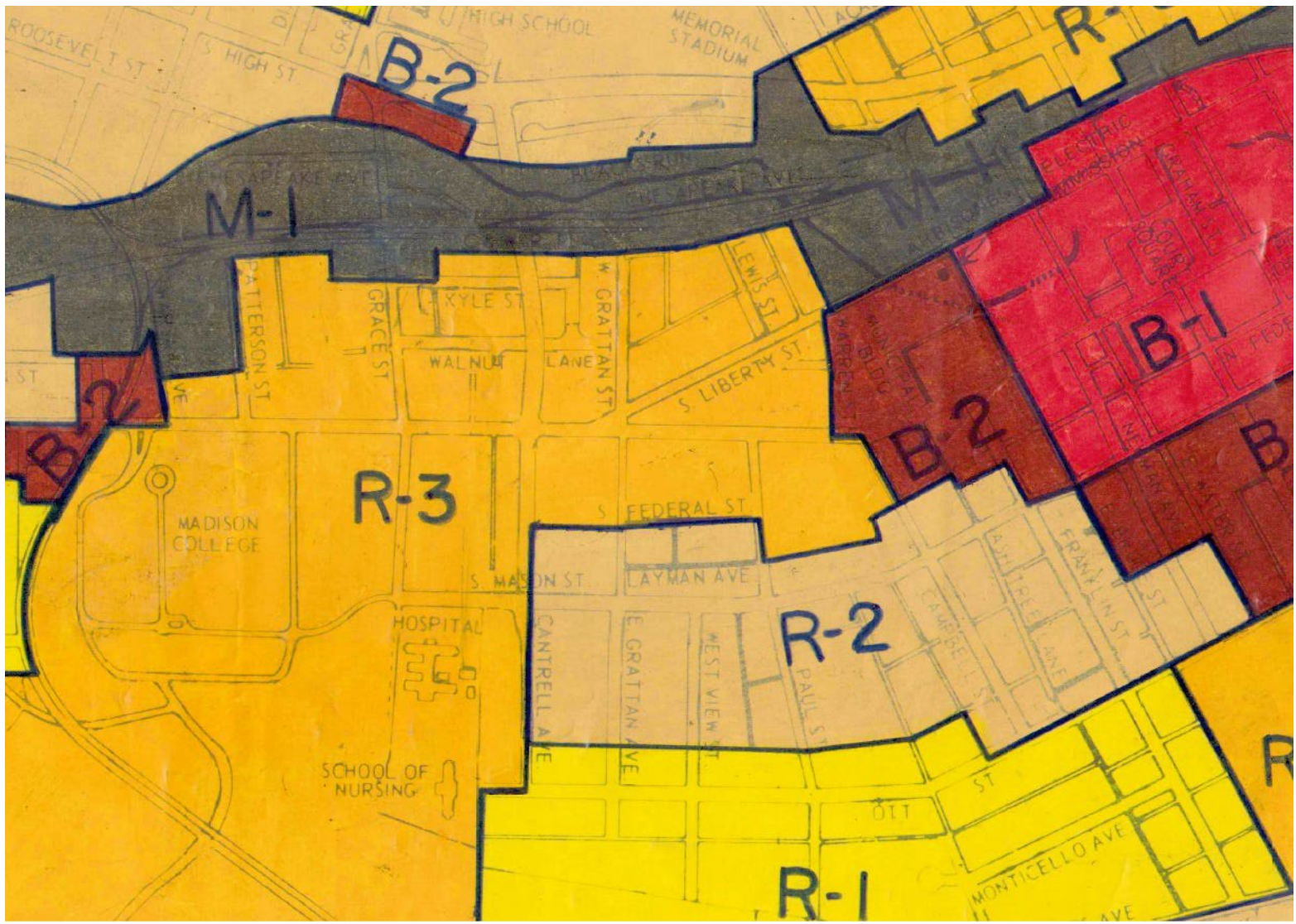
Harrisonburg didn’t have a zoning ordinance until [1939](#). Many of the oldest and most recognizable buildings downtown were built before we had zoning laws. That original 1939 zoning ordinance bears little resemblance to the [labyrinthine document](#) we have today. There have been a number of complete overhauls of the ordinance, and between those overhauls, many, many amendments to change what is allowed in various zoning categories. For example, quadplexes and boarding houses used to be allowed in R-2. Quadplexes are no longer a [by-right](#) use in R-2.

In 1939 and 1951, the properties [where The Link is proposed to be built](#) were zoned A-2 residential. That map, the designations, and the allowed uses changed over time. In the 1963 ordinance, one of the allowed uses in the R-3 multiple dwelling district was “multiple dwellings with no limitations as to number of dwelling units.” But at that time, these particular lots were zoned B-3 (general business district) which allowed for hotels, cold storage plants, bottling plants, car dealerships, and, of course, funeral parlors. Here’s a portion of the zoning map from 1963, showing those lots were zoned B-3 (green).



Harrisonburg zoning map from 1963.

In the 1969 ordinance, R-3 was “intended for medium to high density residential areas [and] other permitted development including colleges, sororities, fraternities.” In 1977, the lots where The Link is proposed to be built show up on the map as R-3.



Harrisonburg zoning map from 1977.

I wasn't able to find much information about why that area was changed from B-3 to R-3 in that 1977 map update, but there are some odd references in the minutes of old city council meetings, like this:

"Having been a member of the Planning Commission when zoning R-3 was conceived, Mr. Denton pointed out that [rezoning properties to R-3] was done in order to relieve situations where sub-standard housing existed on a city street." ([Harrisonburg City Council minutes, April 12, 1977](#))

The 1970s and 1980s were a turning point for local housing policy across the U.S. Zoning ordinances became more strict as [homeowners began to push back against new development](#) and [adaptive reuse](#) of existing structures. A wave of downzonings swept the country, and Harrisonburg was no exception.

Valley's Homesickness: Demand Exceeds Supply

Editor's note: If you want to buy a home for more than \$125,000, there is a "pretty good selection" of homes.

DAILY NEWS-RECORD, HARRISONBURG, VIRGINIA
THURSDAY, MAY 18, 1978

Tighter Zoning Asked

By MARY JANE KING
News-Record Staff Writer

Property owners attempting to preserve the character of their Ott Street neighborhood moved closer to their goal Wednesday.

After a public hearing, the Harrisonburg Planning Commission voted to recommend that the city council rezone lots in the area for single-family homes. The six lots on the east side of the 100 block of Ott now are zoned medium-

Phone Company Changes Systems

WOODSTOCK — The Shenandoah Telephone Co. has completed its move to a new computer-controlled electronic switching office at Woodstock.

Company president Warren B. French Jr. said Saturday's switchover was smooth, with only minor problems remaining Monday.

The \$1.3 million project is the last major one in the company's five-year construction program, French said.

The new switching will allow customers to purchase special services such as forwarding of calls and three-way conference calling.

density residential, which includes duplexes and apartments. But each of the four houses built there is occupied by one family.

The same neighborhood was the scene of a zoning struggle a little over a year ago. At that time, neighbors defeated a rezoning which would have allowed a law office in a house on the block.

The law firm has since sold the house, and a family lives there.

Another rezoning request which stirred opposition about two years ago resurfaced Wednesday.

The commission agreed to hold a public hearing on a request by Gary Judd to rezone a lot on the northeast corner of South Main Street and Port Republic Road.

Judd sought a rezoning from single-family to high-density residential in 1976. At that time, he wanted to convert the house there to professional offices.

Neighbors in Maplehurst subdivision protested and noted that restrictions on the deeds in the subdivision prevent commercial use.

The rezoning was turned down.

The commission tentatively set the public hearing June 21 and asked city planner Robert Sullivan to check court records to see if the lot is part of Maplehurst subdivision. Sullivan also was

asked to find what use Judd plans for the property.

Both rezoning cases are being reopened under a provision which allows city officials to reconsider decisions once a year has elapsed.

Also Wednesday, the planning commission completed a yearlong review of the city's zoning ordinance. The final step was recommendation of a final section on off-street parking requirements.

The section includes requirements for landscaping of parking lots. While commission members agree that controls are needed to "beautify large areas of parking, they have been concerned about enforcement."

City building official John Byrd said Wednesday that the requirements are "great as a design element" but admitted that "enforcement will be a little weak."

If, for example, a business is completed during the winter, the owner will not begin planting until spring. Because city officials already have issued the owner all necessary permits, the city will have "lost our leverage by the time he (the owner) starts planting his trees."

The zoning changes recommended by the planning commission will be sent on to the city council. The council will hold a public hearing before adopting changes.

less than \$125,000.

"People come into our office and say, 'We don't understand why housing has to start at \$60,000 to \$65,000; we can go to Waynesboro or Staunton and get the same thing for \$15,000 less,'" said Kevin Leigh of Sun Tech Construction.

The high cost of housing in the Harrisonburg area means that the first-time buyer and the lower-middle income buyer has to look farther and farther afield for affordable housing.

"Some people go farther out as try to find an old farm house or piece of land and build a little rancher," said Jerry Scripture of Scripture Building Corp.

Rockingham County has so reaped the fruits of the housing boom. According to County Administrator Bill O'Brien, "Building in the County, I would say, is almost at a tripling pace."

O'Brien cites Massanutten View as an example of housing growth in the county. Rockingham is more building permits for resort/housing development in 1977 than in 1976.

See NEWCOMERS, Page 1

Planners Refuse Townhouse Zone

The Harrisonburg Planning Commission voted Wednesday to recommend denial of a request to rezone part of Pleasant Hill Acres to allow a high-density townhouse development.

The recommendation, which will be sent to the city council for its action, was passed by a 5-1 vote.

The request involved 25 acres of the eastern portion of Pleasant Hill Acres which is being developed by Pleasant Hill Developers Inc.

A single-family residential area is now being developed; the townhouse portion lies south of Emory Street to Pleasant Hill Road.

The area is now zoned R-2 which allows single-family homes, duplexes and apartment houses with four units. The developers asked an R-4 zone which allows high density development with as many as 10 townhouse units grouped in one series.

Pleasant Hill Developers showed part of the proposed R-4 area in single-family homes and the remainder built as Sharon Court, a circular drive lined on both sides with townhouse clusters. A total of 84 units, each with planned, with the townhouses to be offered for sale.

The rezoning had been opposed almost unanimously by the homeowners in Pleasant Hill Acres. They cited increased traffic congestion, an overload of the sewer system and overpopulation of the facilities in their petition.

Wednesday, members of the planning commission termed the homeowners' action "Russian roulette."

They noted that with the present R-2 zoning, the developer could cover the 25 acres with four-unit apartment buildings

and double the density planned in the townhouse project.

But two residents who attended Wednesday's special session replied that they were aware of what could develop and were willing to risk the game of roulette.

The Pleasant Hill homeowners also had opposed a proposed strip of neighborhood businesses fronting on Pleasant Hill Road to serve the development.

Only Dr. Paul Cline voted to grant the rezoning request, stating that he felt the developers had presented a good plan and the present homeowners' opposition lost its validity when viewed in the perspective of what the present zoning classification allows.

Voting for denial of the request were E. Warren Denton Jr., Marvin B. Miam, Royal D. Kincheloe, James Glikson and Lyle Sweet.

Contract Vote Slated Sunday

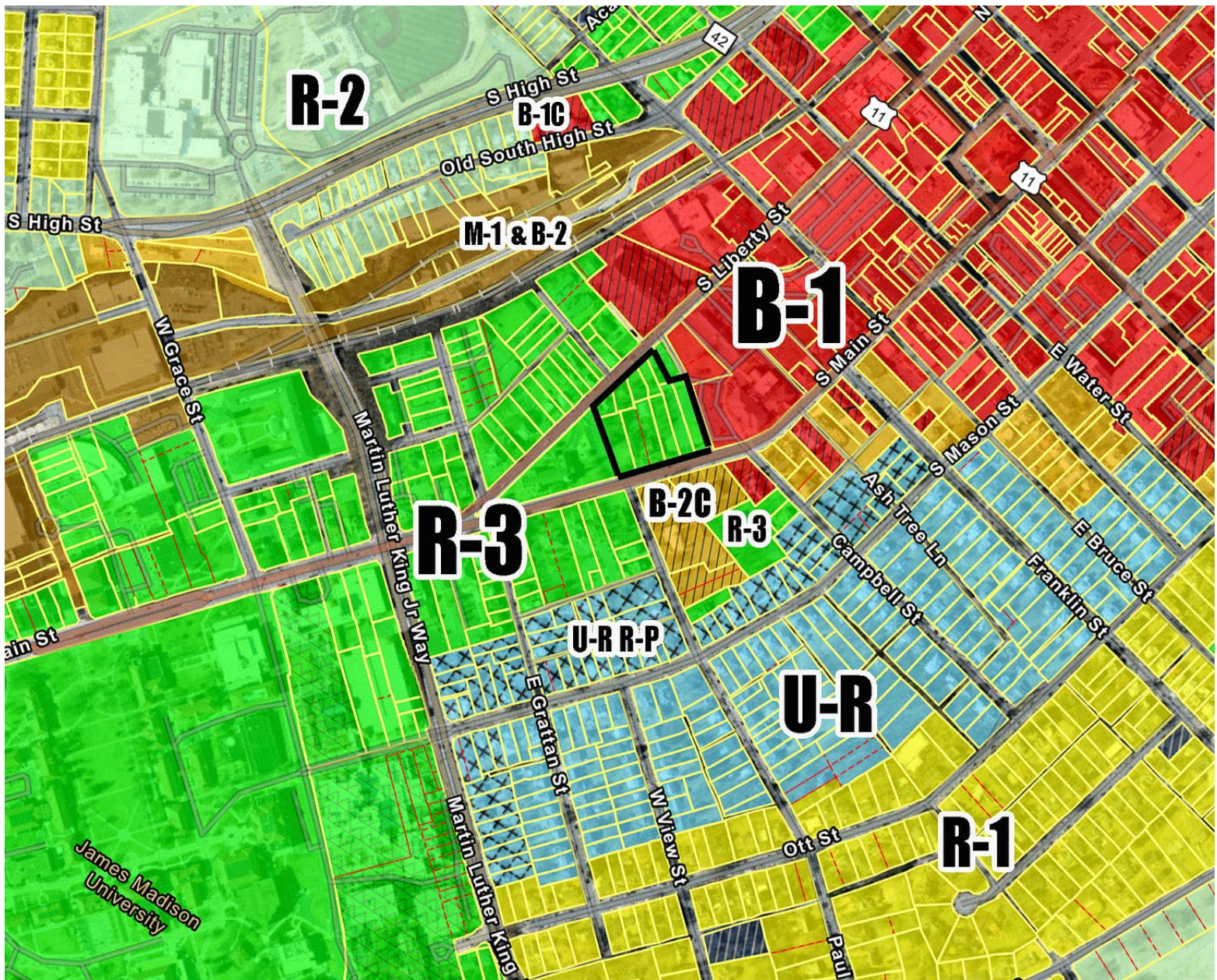
No details of the tentative agreement reached between Local 1439 United Auto Workers and Walker Manufacturing Co. will be released until the union has ratified the agreement, Walker Plant Manager Edward F. Abbott said Wednesday.

The agreement was reached an hour after a scheduled strike 12:01 a.m. Wednesday, following seven hours of negotiations between union and Walker representatives.

Mr. Abbott said he understood the workers will vote on ratification of the contract 2 p.m. Sunday at Timberville, but UAW representatives could not be contacted for verification.

A selection of news article clippings from the Daily News Record from the 1970s and 1980s.

Harrisonburg's zoning ordinance has been updated and amended many times over the years, which means the by-right permissions have changed with it. The trend over the past several decades has been toward more restrictions and rigidity. City staff explained to me that in the 1984 zoning ordinance, R-3 allowed up to 5 people in each unit, but in 1987, it dropped to 4 people per unit. In 2007 the city amended the R-3 district to require approval of a special use permit (SUP) to build multi-family units, even though that 2007 amendment did not go into effect until 2010. Like the [Ship of Theseus](#), there's virtually nothing left of the 1939 original.



Harrisonburg zoning map as it appears in 2025.

My point is this: zoning maps and rules about what is allowed under various designations have changed significantly over time. When the land around the Lindsey Funeral Home was zoned R-3, the population of Harrisonburg was [less than half](#) of what it is today. City leaders and community members had different ideas about what could or should be built on these lots. A hotel or a bottling factory was never built on this site, even though they could have been built by-right until it was rezoned R-3. Similarly, townhomes have never been built here, even though townhomes have been a by-right use since the original Star Wars movie A New Hope was released.

There is no developer lined up to build luxury student townhomes or affordable housing on this site. Townhomes have not been built here, and will most likely continue to not be built here because this particular land is [too valuable](#) for townhomes. Respectfully, I must disagree with Professor Larsson's conclusion: saying no to this rezoning is indeed saying no to development here.

[We need more homes on less land](#) in walkable neighborhoods, and with [fewer cars per dwelling unit](#). Not only would The Link increase housing supply, it would increase supply in a location that is walkable and bikable to popular destinations, including downtown and JMU campus, as well as improvements like the upcoming [Build](#)

[Our Park](#) and [Liberty Street cycle track](#). This is preferable to adding dense housing to the outskirts of town, where residents are most likely to get in a car every time they leave the house.

An [overwhelming majority](#) of current Harrisonburg residents were born after 1977. R-3 hasn't always been R-3 as we know it today. Our zoning ordinance and zoning map should continue to be updated to allow flexibility for Harrisonburg to adapt as the city grows and downtown evolves.

[Why did Harrisonburg become a city?](#)

[Brent Finnegan](#)

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March 4, 2024



Harrisonburg is one of just 41 independent cities in the US. Other than Baltimore, St. Louis, and Carson City, the other 38 are in Virginia. Cities in other states function similarly to the way towns function in Virginia: local governance overlayed on top of (or in addition to) the county government. Virginia towns are part of the counties they're in, b...

[Read full story](#)

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