



## CITY OF HARRISONBURG COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

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March 25, 2025

**TO THE MEMBERS OF CITY COUNCIL  
CITY OF HARRISONBURG, VIRGINIA**

**SUBJECT: *Consider a request from Cat's Cradle of the Shenandoah Valley, Inc. to amend the Zoning Ordinance to allow pet adoptions in B-1***

**EXTRACT FROM THE DRAFT MINUTES OF HARRISONBURG PLANNING  
COMMISSION MEETING HELD ON: March 12, 2025**

Chair Baugh read the request and asked staff to review.

Ms. Soffel said Cat's Cradle, a local nonprofit cat rescue located at 122 South Main Street, is requesting to amend the Zoning Ordinance to allow cat adoptions as a by-right use within the B-1, Central Business District. While the B-1 district allows retail as a by right use, which would allow for businesses such as pet supply stores, it does not permit pet shops, grooming establishments, or animal hospitals. These uses are permitted by right within Section 10-3-90 (9) of the B-2 district, and because the same set of uses are not listed within the uses permitted by right or by special use permit sections of the B-1 district, they are not permitted downtown.

Currently, Cat's Cradle is unable to complete cat adoption transactions at its downtown office due to restrictions in the B-1 district. Instead, they transport the cats off-site to finalize adoptions. This process is challenging since they cannot close their business during working hours and rely on volunteers for transportation and transactions, which leads to delays and occasionally discourages potential adopters.

To allow for cat adoptions in the B-1 district, the Zoning Ordinance would be amended by adding definitions for "pet adoptions" and "pet shops," and then adding the uses within the B-1 and B-2 districts accordingly. If approved, Section 10-3-24 Definitions would be amended by adding the two definitions as follows:

*Pet adoption: The transfer of ownership of a dog or cat, or any other companion animal from a releasing agency to an individual. Such transfer of ownership does not include the purchase, sale, transfer, exchange or bartering of companion animals for compensation or profit.*

Pet shop: Retail establishment where companion animals are bought, sold, exchanged, or offered for sale or exchange, to the general public.

At the same time, Section 10-3-84. Uses Permitted by Right in the B-1, Central Business District, would be amended by adding subsection (15) as shown below:

(15) Pet adoptions, limited only to cats.

The final proposed amendment would modify Section 10-3-90. Uses Permitted by Right in the B-2, General Business District, by explicitly including “pet adoption” alongside pet shops and grooming establishment to avoid any ambiguity. Section 10-3-90 (9) would be amended as follows:

(9) Pet adoption, pet shop, ~~or~~ pet grooming establishment, and animal hospitals.

If the Zoning Ordinance is amended as requested by the applicant, it would allow for cat adoptions, like those conducted by Cat’s Cradle, to occur in the B-1 district. Staff recommends approval of the Zoning Ordinance amendments.

Chair Baugh said I will go ahead and ask because the specific request from Cat’s Cradle is pet adoptions and we are sort of adding the pet shops in there. I have not had anybody reach out to me on this one, but I have in some other context before. There are some aspects of some pet shops that are considered less savory among folks. I was just wondering if there were any thoughts on why we are including [pet shops].

Ms. Soffel said pet shops are already allowed in B-2 without being defined. Since we are defining pet adoptions we want to make sure that by defining pet adoptions we are not creating any confusion as to what a pet shop would allow.

Commissioner Nardi said pet shop is already allowed?

Ms. Soffel said yes, without a definition.

Commissioner Washington said is there a reason why it is limited only to cats?

Ms. Soffel said simply because that is the request. We have not evaluated allowing other pets. There could be other implications with other pets such as dogs; noise, where they would do their business, the need to move around a little bit more. We have not evaluated that fully.

Chair Baugh said I have not looked at any stats recently but historically the pattern is that one of the reasons you do not have an equivalent [to Cat’s Cradle] for dogs is because it is not the same kind of issue. Dog adoptions tend to go fairly quickly. Going back a few years when there was a lot more discussion about euthanization in animal shelters. In fact, one of the reasons we had a high euthanasia rate here was that our area essentially produced a lot more cats than people who could easily get them, which is not true nationwide. With cats there is a whole lot more people that have them and getting places where they can give them to people who want them in other

communities. There is a whole other level of things that is developed with cat adoptions that has not been an issue with dogs.

Vice Chair Finnegan said there is a cat café downtown, what does that fall under?

Ms. Soffel said as long as they are processing adoptions that are not for profit, they would be allowed to do so as well on their property. This would benefit them as well.

Vice Chair Finnegan said Cat's Cradle used to be located downtown across from Jimmy Madison's. Was that nonconforming?

Ms. Soffel said I do not think they are in the same suite that they had been previously.

Vice Chair Finnegan said Cat's Cradle as they used to operate prior to the renovation of that building, was that a nonconforming use?

Ms. Soffel said it is allowed.

Ms. Dang said they are just keeping the animal on the premises. We had that discussion in the hallway just yesterday about how I think about the gentleman who has the shop along the Water Street [Parking] Deck who has a dog in his shop window there. There is nothing in our ordinance that prohibits people from having the animals present. It is the activity of the adoption, or the sale, that type of transactional activity that had been prohibited.

Mr. Fletcher said I will add about ten years ago there were pet adoptions occurring from Cat's Cradle and there was a concern that was submitted to us that they were doing so illegally. We investigated the matter and worked very closely with Cat's Cradle at the time to help them get into compliance and that is when they changed their operation and then moved off site to do the adoptions.

Chair Baugh asked if there were any more questions for staff. Hearing none, he asked if there was anyone in the room or on the phone wishing to speak to the request.

Sherri Heishman, the applicant, came forward to speak to the request. She said we do about 600 adoptions a year at the local PetSmart. You can imagine that is a lot of traffic traveling back and forth. Today, we had a couple come in they were both 80 years old. They came in they fell in love with a cat. They had to pack everything up that they brought, get into their car, we had to teach them how to get over to PetSmart. Then we had to call a volunteer in to meet them over at the PetSmart to hand the cat over. We would love the opportunity to have that happen right there in our locality that we are at now. We are right across from Jimmy Madison's. We used to be at the end and they moved us over one unit because that end cap was a lot more attractive real estate and so we are in a smaller location. We have our cats in two front windows and usually there is between two and three cats in each window unless they are kittens then we could have more. We are also sanctioned by the Virginia Department of Agriculture [and Consumer Services]. We have to make sure that the cats are fed properly, that they have the right climbing apparatuses. We have to make sure we have an isolation area if the cat were to get sick. All of our people are trained on those

specification. We do about 600 adoptions a year. We also helped with 3,925 spay and neuter assistance last year and we did 1,400 trap neuter returns between Augusta County and Rockingham. That is why you are seeing the intake at the shelters go down.

Chair Baugh asked if there was anyone in the room or on the phone wishing to speak to the request. Hearing none, he closed the public hearing and opened the matter for discussion.

Vice Chair Finnegan said to the point of the comment that you just made, I have been to PetSmart exactly one time and it was to pick up cats. I would have preferred to just go downtown. I would be supportive of this.

Commissioner Nardi said I am also supportive of it. I move to approve the ordinance amendment as presented.

Vice Chair Finnegan seconded the motion.

Commissioner Porter said this seems like one of those opportunities where the government can get out of the way and let somebody do something that makes sense. This is a common sense move that we are making this change.

Chair Baugh said not so much recently but over a large majority of time a lot of positive things have happened in recent years in this area.

Chair Baugh called for a roll call vote.

Commissioner Nardi	Aye
Vice Chair Finnegan	Aye
Commissioner Washington	Aye
Commissioner Porter	Aye
Chair Baugh	Aye

The motion to recommend approval of the ordinance amendment passed (5-0). The recommendation will move forward to City Council on April 8, 2025.