

Roanoke rezones historic home

Civil rights lawyer Oliver Hill's childhood home will become a center for legal aid.

By [Mason Adams](#) | 981-3253

The Roanoke City Council voted unanimously Monday to approve a rezoning request to turn civil rights pioneer Oliver Hill's childhood home into a legal aid center and museum.

Washington and Lee University law students will use the house to provide legal aid services for clients age 60 years or older who are referred through Blue Ridge Legal Services, said Mary Natkin, assistant dean of W&L's law school.

"I'm just pleased and proud to see this come to fruition," said Vice Mayor Sherman Lea.

Hill, who was born in Richmond but spent much of his youth in Roanoke, is most remembered for his work on *Davis v. County School Board of Prince Edward County*, a case that was later combined with four other cases to become *Brown v. Board of Education*. The U.S. Supreme Court's 1954 decision in *Brown* overturned *Plessy v. Ferguson* -- the 1896 ruling that allowed "separate but equal" schools for black and white children -- and helped end government-sanctioned segregation in public schools.

Hill died in August in Richmond, which had long been his home.

The Oliver White Hill Foundation last year bought the house at 401 Gilmer Ave. N.W., where the civil rights lawyer spent his youth.

Natkin said the legal services will be a collaborative effort among the Oliver White Hill Foundation, Blue Ridge Legal Services, the Roanoke Bar Association and Project 2025, a state initiative aimed at enhancing legal assistance for older adults. The work will be performed by law students and overseen by a recent law school graduate.

Natkin told the council that she envisions a focus on financial planning, debt management and Medicare issues. Potential projects for the future include representation in Supplemental Security Income matters, prisoner rights cases and children's rights and guardianship issues.