

Suburbs

Keep school in town, groups say

Leaders rally to keep Simpsonville Elementary open

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Simpsonville Elementary is in the school district's crosshairs for relocation because it's an outdated facility and has a bulging student body.

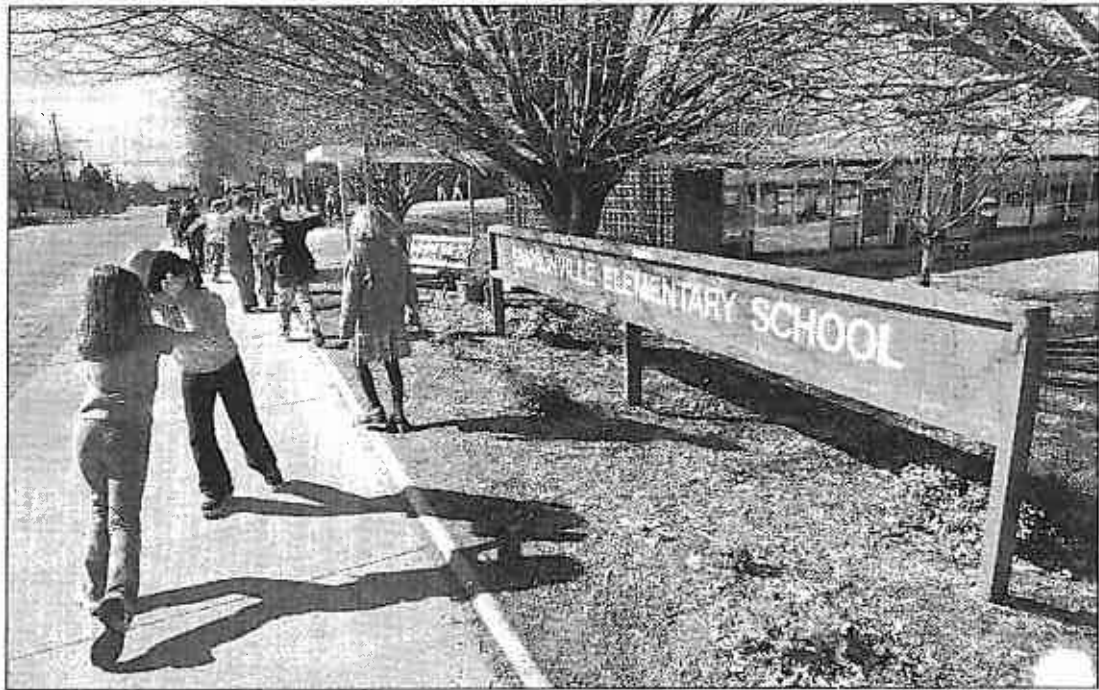
But leaders of the Simpsonville community, encouraged by the smart-growth organization Upstate Forever, are taking a stand to keep the historic downtown school in the heart of its community.

Simpsonville 2020, the City Council's advisory committee charged with visionary work, agreed Tuesday to send a resolution to the Greenville County school board endorsing the current location for a renovated, enlarged facility.

"I think we have widespread community support," said Jeff Richardson, acting chairman of the 2020 Committee.

Current school district plans call for consolidating Simpsonville and Morton Elementary schools into a new facility to be built on Boyd Avenue adjacent to the existing Morton school, also inside the city limits, said Leroy Hamilton, assistant superintendent for Greenville County schools.

"Number one, there's plenty of room there," he said. "Number



BART BOATWRIGHT / Staff

Neighborhood school: Simpsonville Elementary students make their way between classes Tuesday. Simpsonville leaders say taking the school out of downtown would hurt revitalization efforts.

two, we own it; we don't have to buy it."

The current Simpsonville Elementary site, he said, has two main flaws: its small size and the road that cuts the campus in half.

Diane Eldridge, associate director of Upstate Forever, told the 2020 committee that keeping a school in the heart of a community protects property values, curbs the sprawl that inevitably follows the school's infrastructure and keeps people downtown.

"If you want to revitalize your downtown, the last thing you want to do is take your school out," she said.

School Trustee Marilyn Hendrix is aware "a number of folks" support keeping an elementary school on the current site of Simpsonville Elementary.

"There are some challenges that would have to be overcome before that could take place," Hendrix said. "For example, I believe there are only 8 acres there, and the state calls for a good deal more acreage than that."

The state does have a number of requirements — including acreage — for new construction or additions to schools, but waivers aren't unusual for urban set-

tings, said Alex James, director of the school facilities office for the state Department of Education.

He cited Stone Academy, just north of downtown Greenville, as an example of an elementary school that didn't meet space criteria but figured out a way to use a restricted site.

With the resurgence of interest in using the Simpsonville Elementary land, Hendrix expects the school district to take a look at both sites and come back to trustees with a recommendation. "It's kind of up for grabs right now," she said.