

# Supporters hope to keep downtown school open

Simpsonville Elementary perceived  
as important to healthy community

By L.C. Leach III  
Tribune-Times Writer

Members of Simpsonville's 2020 group may get their wish to keep Simpsonville Elementary School open.

With backing from Mayor Dennis Waldrop, Greenville architect Scott Johnston, and Diane Eldridge of Upstate Forever, the 2020 group is closer than ever to keeping the 117-year-old school operating at its current downtown site.

Official word has yet to come down from the Greenville County school district, but Waldrop and district assistant superintendent Leroy Hamilton plan to meet soon to discuss the possibility of expanding the school on its current site.

The pending meeting grew partly out of the 2020 group's objection to school district plans to close two of the city's elementary schools — Simpsonville and Morton — and consolidate both groups of students in a new school building on the old Ingles site next to Interstate-385 on West Georgia Road.

But complications with the I-385 interchange, scheduled to be revamped by the Department of Transportation, forced school district officials to look for an alternative site.

They chose the Morton property due several factors, including its 20-acre

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size, the district owns the land and it has available utilities, access roads and sidewalks.

Butch Kirven, chairman of Simpsonville 2020, said consolidating the two groups of students on the Morton site would not benefit the city.

"My position was always that (a new school) had to meet the same site characteristics as the one we have now — connectivity, walkability, access to churches and local businesses, and the (increasing the worth of) property values," he said.

These characteristics "are not shared or not present at the Morton site," he said.

While the Ingles site possibly would have opened up those same kinds of features to West Georgia Road, the downtown still would have suffered if Morton and Simpsonville elementary schools had been consolidated there, he said.

"There is not a better site for (Simpsonville Elementary) than where it is right now," Kirven said.

Eldridge, director of Upstate Forever, drove home the same point in a slide presentation Jan. 22 at the 2020's monthly meeting.

She referred mostly to a study she conducted two

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years ago of the Simpsonville area.

One of her conclusions was that the attraction of growth to the city in the last 10 years had to do with the style and location of the downtown school.

"It's in a historical neighborhood for one thing," Eldridge said, citing the city's population increase by more than 2,600 in the last 10 years. "During that same period of time, Anderson, Greenville and Spartanburg all lost residents from their city limits. There's a reason people want to pay city taxes and county taxes to live inside your city limits. And I think one of the reasons is that there is a community school here."

She added that property values is another consideration.

In her study, she found that the average home price in Simpsonville was \$140,000. The elimination of Simpsonville Elementary would tend to reduce the overall resale value of city homes by almost 10 percent, or \$14,000.

"That makes a pretty big dent in someone's net worth," she said.

School district officials have said repeatedly that the current Simpsonville site is not feasible for either a new building or renovation.

The site is too small — 8.75 acres; it is on two separate pieces of land; and, there is no room to expand because the school is landlocked — bordered by the city park, the city cemetery and Simpsonville First Baptist Church.

But Johnston, an architect with the Johnston Design Group in Greenville, said the expansion could happen.

He said it would hinge on the school's ability to obtain additional land from the city park, due to site requirements as set forth by the state Department of Education.

"The Department of Education requires 10 acres plus one acre for every 100 students," Johnston said.

Simpsonville Elementary is hovering at 750 students, which means 17.5 acres would be needed to handle an expansion and renovation for that number

of students. Add another 185 from Morton and the amount of needed land rises to just more than 20 acres.

"Extra land for playground space and parking could be obtained from the city park and a two-story building for classrooms could be built on the land already owned by the school district," said Johnston, who designed the Governor's School for the Arts in Greenville. "As long as those kinds of agreements could be worked out with the city park, (expansion of the school) could work real well out there."

Jeff Richardson, acting chairman for the 2020 group, asked members and Waldrop on behalf of the city for the go-ahead to submit a resolution to the school district to keep Simpsonville Elementary open.

His suggestion passed with no opposition.

Waldrop said he also will try to get the issue put on the agenda for discussion at the next City Council meeting, scheduled for Feb. 12 at City Hall.

"And I would like Ms. Eldridge to come to the meeting and make the same presentation to council and get them in the loop," Waldrop said.