

# Upstate workshop to look at ghost box busting

## Empty retail buildings posing problems

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They call them ghost boxes. They're the cavernous remains major retailers leave behind as they hopscotch across a community in search of better business locations.

And at least one area organization is trying to do something about them.

Upstate Forever, a regional nonprofit organization committed to sensible growth, will present a "Your Town: The Citizens' Institute on Rural Design" workshop for 30 to 40 elected officials, developers and representatives of community organizations Sept. 13-15 at the Mary Black Foundation in Spartanburg. The event is one of four across the country funded by a \$22,000 grant

from the National Endowment for the Arts.

This will be the first workshop funded by the NEA grant program to examine ghost boxes, said Emily Neely, program director for Upstate Forever's Spartanburg office.

Greenville County's administrative offices are now housed in a once abandoned shopping center. And area leaders have discussed plans to reuse the languishing buildings.

There were 22 such properties in Spartanburg County as of January this year. Most are located along retail corridors in the city of Spartanburg.

Critics say ghost boxes, accompanied by their broad expanses of asphalt parking lots, are unsightly, attract undesirable elements, contribute to storm water run off and leave the impression an area is in economic decline.

Retailers abandon these big boxes when they leave a market or when they relocate to a larger and/or more desirable location in the same market.

Big boxes have continued to grow in

size to accommodate greater varieties of products and services. The largest are the behemoth Wal-Mart Superstores, with up to about 220,000 square feet of floor space that includes a grocery store.

But communities across the country have begun to fight back by requiring design and landscaping standards developers have to meet and holding companies accountable for the buildings they leave behind.

Mount Pleasant near Charleston has a design standard that allows for grass surfaces to be used as overflow parking at shopping centers to reduce the amount of asphalt, Neely said.

Some communities are requiring retailers to find new tenants for buildings they vacate within a certain period of time or pay to have them demolished. Others offer tax incentives for reuse of existing space.

However, finding new tenants isn't always easy for stores designed to meet a specific retailer's needs. And the larger a ghost box is, the harder it

is to recycle.

Some communities have gotten creative in redeveloping these properties for other uses.

Upstate Forever sponsored a trip last year for elected officials and developers to visit North Hills in Raleigh. Developer John Kane has transformed the old shopping mall there into a lifestyle center, complete with shopping, restaurants, and office and residential space. A hotel is also planned.

Virtually all of the parking at the complex is underground.

"It's very walkable," said Neely.

Organizers view the upcoming workshop as an opportunity to consider setting possible design standards and ways to encourage more redevelopment of ghost boxes.

The program will include presentations by experts from across the country as well as a case study panel featuring representatives of other communities where design standards for retail development are being used successfully.