

## **Save the old Berea Elementary and the community with it!**

To Whom It May Concern:

I'm writing to share my support for the preservation of Berea Elementary School. I am graduate of Berea Elementary, along with my mother and father, Deanie and Debby Presnell, and my grandmother, Ruth Evelyn Farr and her brother and sisters, all members of the Farr family for whom Farris Bridge Road is named.

My family has called Berea home since its founding, occupying a roughly 100-acre plot just one block from Berea Elementary on Sulphur Springs Rd. I have many fond memories of the old halls, the creaking floors of the school house, and walking to and from school each day, often accompanied by my loving grandmother who was enormously proud of her alma mater. My grandfather, a brick mason, built the elementary school sign that stood on the corner by hand, as a gift to school during my time as a student there. And I remember with fondness setting the flag a flight on the pole in the mornings as a school crossing guard, and gently taking it down in the evening. The school's history is deeply embedded in my family's history, and I'm sure it is for many others in the community, too.

But, I do not write to you because of my family's history in the community, but rather the future of Berea itself. The proposed redevelopment of the site adds no value to the future of the community.

From a community planning perspective, Berea suffers from the blight of temporary commercial development. For too long, civic leaders, developers and planners involved in Berea's making have lacked imagination, strategic thinking, and solutions for long-term sustainability and growth. Development has been driven by a race to the bottom approach, which has now left the community in peril, and with little hope.

I do not have access to the numbers at hand, but I am willing to venture that unused/empty commercial space is plentiful in the community. Less than 200 yards from the Berea Elementary site sits a vacant big box strip mall, with the empty shells of two former grocery stores and the now defunct K-mart. Just up the street sits the empty former-Blockbuster video store. With so many boarded-up businesses and commercial vacancies, Berea seems faded, worn and abandoned; it has the feeling of a ghost town.

The current plans for a fast food chain restaurant and an auto parts store, provide only a short term solution--if that--to a longterm problem; that is, how to best sustain the health and wellbeing of our community for the families, and businesses that call it home.

Unlike the communities of Traveler's Rest, Easley, or Pickens, Berea, unfortunately, was never developed around a "main street." It lacks a civic core which might encourage community-building, and bring people together for shopping, dining, or recreation--the kind of infrastructure that has made urban renewal in upstate towns of a similar size so appealing.

One could easily argue that the old Berea Elementary site, alongside Berea Shopping Center (what must be the oldest commercial development in the area), is the closest the community has to creating a civic core. The Berea Shopping Center has managed over the years to preserve itself. Wilson's Five and Dime has remained opened for well over 30 years.

During its life as a school, the playground and basketball court at Berea Elementary served as a much needed park for local youth--a place where me and my friends gathered in the evenings and on weekends to play football in the field, and run wild on the slides and swings. In fact, there is no other Greenville County Park nearby, only Westside Park to the south and Poinsett Park to the north, both of which are approximately six miles or more away.

While it may prove too costly to maintain the buildings as they currently exist there are several significant attributes and elements that can be salvaged, retrofitted, and reconsidered that will add value to the community.

Here are a few ideas for you to consider:

- Preserve the facade and look and feel of the old buildings for any new development.
- Use the space to facilitate community engagement by devoting a significant proportion of it to a public park, and blending site development with private business and public service.
- Seriously consider saving the auditorium and turning it into a community venue for theatre, music performances, and other events. It is a glorious old space that with some effort could spring to life again and animate the community.
- Find ways to repurpose some of the smaller out buildings and work them into the redevelopment plan.
- Most importantly, join with long-standing and new members of the community and aspire to something great. Join them in their vision of a healthy community and help them build it. Do not continue to shackle them to suburban ghettoization and race-to-the bottom short term solutions.

It is my sincere hope that you can find a way to preserve the integrity and purpose of the old Berea Elementary site so that it may continue to advance the community in the same spirit and function that it did for the many who passed through its halls. Its history is apparent, and though it may be somewhat tarnished from the years of neglect, the old Berea Elementary site is a symbol of what makes a community great: the investment in our young people, the investment in our future, and the pride of place that transforms a set of random houses on a street into a neighborhood, and a civic family. Help us restore hope to our community.

Best,  
Daniel Presnell