

## City Council approves historic designation for former Mary H. Wright Elementary School

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 23

## Council unanimously approves historic designation, approves rule change for local historic restorations 5-2



After voting to postpone action at their last meeting, Spartanburg City Council voted unanimously to add the former Mary H. Wright Elementary School building to the City's local historic property registry. The City's Historic Architecture Review Board (HARB) previously approved the designation 6-1. The building is the first commercial building included in the registry.

Council previously approved a property rezoning and development agreement in November that will allow the former school located at 261 Caulder Ave. to be converted into 53 apartment units. Under terms of the agreement, 11 of the apartments will be workforce housing units and will be rented to households at 80 percent or less of area median income with rent and utilities for the tenants amounting to no more than 30 percent of their income.

The \$11 million redevelopment represents the largest private investment on the city's Southside in well over a decade and developer John Montgomery also has agreed to provide \$50,000 to a public-private partnership or nonprofit in order to improve pedestrian and trail infrastructure in the area aimed at connecting Caulder Ave. to the Mary H. Wright Greenway. Montgomery has also pledged his best efforts to ensure that a minimum of 20 percent of the redevelopment work will go to minority contractors, with five percent of those living on the Southside.

Long an important part of the city's Southside community, the former school was named for Mary Honor Farrow Wright, who was a pioneering educator and important figure in Spartanburg's history, founding the city's second school for Black students on the Southside where she taught until 1936. In 1951, the then-new Mary H. Wright elementary school on Caulder Ave. was named in her honor. The name was carried over to the current campus on Church St. when the school was closed. The building was later used as office space for Spartanburg Housing Authority and the City but has been vacant for the past five years.

Prior to voting on the historic designation, City Council voted 5-2 on a rule change that alters City Code to read that when proposed modifications to a locally designated historic property have been approved by the State Office of Historic Preservation (SHPO), those same modifications would only need to be

approved by the City at the staff level without a separate review by the City's HARB. Council members Meghan Smith and Erica Brown voted against.

City Manager Chris Story explained in a memo to City Council that the change is meant to accommodate developments that must seek approval from SHPO, which uses the same governing standards used by HARB. According to the memo, the proposed rule change was meant to avoid the complication of potentially having a development approved by SHPO but not approved by HARB and would ultimately strengthen local historic preservation efforts, saying that the current rules create "a point or risk and uncertainty that could dissuade others from taking on such projects."

Council voted at their previous meeting to postpone both the historic designation and the historic preservation rule change over concerns at that the change seemed too closely tied to the planned redevelopment of the former Mary H. Wright Elementary School and a desire to hear perspectives from HARB members prior to approving the rule change.