

## City leaders close to deal for new Southside grocery store

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## City planning to put funding behind full-service grocery store concept to fill former discount grocery store space



At a recent public meeting at C.C. Woodson Community Center, City Council member Ruth Littlejohn led a discussion about a subject on the minds of many of her Southside constituents: the effort to attract a new grocery store in the space left vacant when Save-A-Lot closed in 2019.

There was interest not only in when a store might return to 550 South Church Street, but what kind of shopping experience local residents could expect.

Willa Reeder said she hoped to see bargains – like the offerings that made Save-A-Lot popular for more than a decade. Another participant, former mayor James Talley, said he was all for low prices but didn't want to see "just a cheap store." He hopes for the Southside to be home to a store that "anyone would shop there and feel good about it."

Littlejohn said City of Spartanburg leaders feel good about discussions with a potential grocery operator. She said it was too soon to publicly identify the store brand under consideration but responded to audience comments by saying, "I think you are going to be pleased."

City Manager Chris Story was on hand, as well, and he spoke to the potential for a Southside store to attract a diverse base of customers and, in turn, for the grocer to offer a high-quality array of products at various price points.

Things have evolved, he said, since Save-A-Lot, an unabashed bargain store, came to the Southside in 2007. The neighborhood has grown stronger, and income levels have increased. More and more people live and work and eat out in the nearby downtown district. And traffic on South Church Street has increased, with more commuters driving into the city and back home from outlying areas such as Moore and Roebuck.

All this makes it possible, Story believes, "to have a grocery store on the Southside that we'd be proud to have anywhere in Spartanburg."

The City, he said, is in discussions with an investor and prospective store operator who hopes to bring a widely known grocery brand to Spartanburg as a franchisee. The store would include a coffee shop, a full deli and fresh-made pizzas as well as a wide variety of name-brand packaged products.

While Story is excited about prospects for a successful store, he acknowledges challenges. The old Save-A-Lot facility needs some updating and expanding (without edging out other tenants in the South Church Plaza, he noted) to make way for a full-service grocer. And while the Southside appears to be in a stronger position than it was years ago, it still doesn't command the same traffic and buying power of some other areas of the local market.

The grocery business is highly competitive, and, weighing all factors with great scrutiny, chains tend to be cautious – that's why they city is working with an individual franchisee willing to take risk rather than an established, corporate-run chain.

Story said the city has been thorough in its research, too. Leaders have studied stores similar to the one envisioned in Spartanburg – including the markets where they are in business.

The City of Spartanburg is prepared to commit to a significant financial investment in the project in the form of a loan. Story says some risk is involved – the city's return will depend on the success of the store. "If sales go like we hope, the city will get its money back," he said.

"We believe this is a model that's viable," he added.

The investment in a new grocery store is an extension of a longstanding commitment to supporting the Southside.

"The City of Spartanburg, along with private partners and supporters, put a great deal of effort into bringing Save-A-Lot to the Southside," Story said. "Save-A-Lot served the community well for a number of years. But we are excited about the prospects for even greater things to come in years ahead."