

The Alexander Baker Building Adaptive Reuse Project - 2019

Citizens for Backus/Alexander Baker, Inc. was founded in 2002 to save the historic Alexander Baker (AB) School (1914) and Backus Jr. High School (1937) in downtown International Falls. Today, these buildings are the heart of the International Falls community. Filled to capacity with non-residential tenants, programs, performances, and community events, the Backus building sees almost 60,000 visitors a year. Backus has partnered with KOOTASCA Community Action, a local Community Housing Development Organization, whose mission is "Building community to end poverty," with the plan to bring KOOTASCA's anti-poverty programming, community services, and Head Start classrooms to the first floor of the 40,000 square foot Alexander Baker building; repurposing the second and third floors for direly needed housing in our community. The Alexander Baker building has stood vacant since 1995.

Our project proposes the adaptive reuse of the historic AB School in downtown International Falls into 18-24 units of affordable housing and space for community services. Our goal is to preserve this historic community asset that has played such an important role in the life of our community while meeting our community's current needs for affordable housing and community services in a way that revitalizes the building and downtown area.

Beautifully designed by Bell, Tyrie, and Chapman in the Classical Revival style, the three-story AB building was constructed in 1914 as a K-12 school. The building is listed on the National Register of Historic Places for its local historical significance; the original interior building layout and many of the original finishes are still intact. A walk through the building today transports the visitor back in time. In testament to the quality of craftsmanship of that era, the original steam boilers still supply heat to the Backus Building today.



Conceptual image

Backus Community Center Renovation
International Falls, MN

January 2011

Alexander Baker Building Chronology

1912 - 2019

- 1912** Construction begins
- 1914** The Alexander Baker School is dedicated in June
- 1936** The E.W. Backus School is constructed directly to the south of the Baker School
- 1978** In response to energy concerns the windows in the Baker and Backus Schools are down-sized and partially filled in with insulated panels
- 1983** The Alexander Baker School is tuck-pointed
- 1987** The Backus auditorium is refurbished
- 1988** School District #361 offices move into the Alexander Baker School from Falls Junior High School and all classes move out of the School
- 1991** All traditional classes move out of the Backus School, but portions of the building remain in use for other school district purposes
- 1995** The School District offices move to the Backus School from the Baker School, and a sprinkler system is installed in part of the complex
- 1996** Hail damages the roof of the Alexander Baker and Backus Buildings
- 1999** Alexander Baker and Backus Buildings are placed on Preservation Alliance of MN's list of "10 Most Endangered Historic Buildings"
- 2002** Citizens for Backus/AB, Inc. purchases the Alexander Baker and Backus Buildings for \$850
- 2004** Alexander Baker and Backus Buildings are placed on the National Register of Historic Places
- 2005** A market analysis of housing potential for the building is conducted
- 2008** \$180,000 is raised to replace the roof
- 2012** SJA Architects develop plans for repurposing the Alexander Baker building for a KOOTASCA service center and apartments
- 2016** Environmental testing is conducted
- 2016** The Voyage Forward "Quality of Life" Destiny Driver Team tours the Baker Building. The potential for affordable housing becomes apparent to KOOTASCA and Backus staff
- 2017** Asbestos is removed from a 3rd floor classroom and other areas encapsulated and secured. Original 1912 Boiler Refractories are re-built
- Boards of Directors of Backus and KOOTASCA sign joint resolutions to work toward the reuse of the AB School
- Koochiching Co. Housing Collaborative is organized by KOOTASCA and Backus. 24 stakeholders join the table to discuss housing issues and solutions for the community
- 2018** Koochiching Co. Housing Collaborative raises more than \$35,000 to conduct a housing study
- Community Partners Research begins work on a comprehensive housing study
- Site visit by the Preservation Alliance of MN
- KOOTASCA is awarded a "Strengthening Rural Communities" grant for technical assistance for the Alexander Baker project from MN Housing Partnership
- Backus receives a MN Historical Society grant award of \$10,000 to conduct a "Conditions Assessment" of the Alexander Baker Building
- 2019** Backus and KOOTASCA apply to participate in the American Institute of Architects Search for Shelter Design Charrette
- Kaas Wilson Architects hired to complete a building conditions assessment
- Community Partners Research completes the housing study and makes significant recommendations for addressing housing challenges in Koochiching County. The study recommends the rehabilitation and re-use of the Alexander Baker School as affordable housing
- Alexander Baker Building selected to participate in the American Institute of Architects Minnesota Search for Shelter Design Charrette