

Mineral Wells voters overwhelmingly support Baker Hotel renovation

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Since the Baker Hotel opened in 1929, its fortunes have been intertwined with the city of Mineral Wells.

Following Saturday's vote, Mineral Wells officials hope both the town and the hotel are on their way to a rebirth.

In what developers are calling the last piece for the dilapidated hotel's much-needed makeover, nearly 96 percent of the city's voters approved reallocating an eighth of a cent of the city's sales tax to the \$56 million project.

In final totals, 1,558 voted in favor and 65 voted against.

"We've told the investors that the people want this," said Mineral Wells Mayor Mike Allen. "We're 100 percent behind them."

If all of the pieces fall into place, developers said, financing for the project could be in place later this year or early 2015.

Southlake-based Hunter Chase Capital Partners has been working for six years to put together the financing to restore the Baker, a landmark hotel that has a rich and storied history.

"We're still in line to have financing by the end of the year," said Chad Patton of Hunter Chase. "To be able to say we have more than 95 percent approval — it just screams to our investors that they are going to have a community impact with their investments, which is what they want."

City leaders and residents were gathering on the steps of the Baker on Saturday night where a banner saying "Thank you Friend: Welcome to Our Future" had been displayed.

"We've got our champagne glasses in hand," Patton said. "We're ready to celebrate."

‘Vote for the Baker’

The election was to decide whether to reallocate a portion of the city’s 4B economic development sales tax. It will not raise taxes but will use a portion of the existing sales tax.

Allen believes the Baker Hotel renovation will be the turning point for the town of 16,788 that has seen its population numbers remain largely stagnant.

“We’re trying to take this back to the glory days of the ’20s, ’30s and ’40s,” Allen said. “I don’t think anybody can really imagine what this is going to do for our city.”

The Baker hosted its last guest in 1972. The following year, Fort Wolters, where helicopter pilots trained during the Vietnam War, was deactivated.

Since its closing, the Baker has been the subject of countless redevelopment rumors.

In the lead-up to the election, a “Save the Baker” Facebook page was created and “Vote for the Baker” signs popped up all over town. Across the street at Jitter Beans Roasting Co., visitors have bought Baker T-shirts and clamored to be the first guests at the renovated hotel.

Even in its current dilapidated state, the Baker has been a draw for visitors, including those who have tried to sneak into the hotel. Some have also claimed it was haunted.

Mineral Wells gained popularity as a health resort after officials claimed that mineral waters cured a variety of disorders.

By 1920, the town had 400 mineral wells, and it was billed as “the South’s greatest health resort,” according to the Handbook of Texas.

The 200-room Crazy Water Hotel would open in 1927, and hotel magnate T.B. Baker would open the Baker in 1929, the same year as the stock market crash.

Celebrity allure

When the Baker opened, it included mineral baths, an Olympic-size swimming pool and a rooftop nightclub known as the Cloud Room. Old-timers recall hearing music stream out across town at night.

Among the celebrities who stayed at the Baker were Judy Garland, Clark Gable, Roy Rogers and the Three Stooges, according to the Texas Almanac.

“Back in those days, the Baker would probably rival anything in Las Vegas today,” former assistant manager Roy D. Walker said in a 1993 Star-Telegram article.

By World War II, Mineral Wells was becoming a military town, and the Baker would be filled with soldiers as the hotel began its slow decline.

The hotel would first close in 1963, only to reopen two years later, before closing again in 1972.

“I’ve worked on this for six years and to see it come to reality is almost overwhelming,” Allen said. “It’s not only about what this does for the city but the way people feel about this project and the pride they have in their town.”

This article includes material from Star-Telegram archives.