

SMITH BAKER CENTER LOWELL



Built in 1884 for the First Congregational Church, this massive, red brick, Victorian style structure faces Lowell's City Hall and Pollard Memorial Library, coincidentally designed by the same architectural firm, Merrill and Cutler. The building features a two-tiered 10,000 SF auditorium with 600 seats.

Purchased by the City of Lowell in 1975, the structure was named the Smith Baker Center in honor of a charismatic minister of the earlier

era of the Congregational Church. Beginning in 1968 during the First congregational ownership, it started to serve as the Council on Aging, and after City acquisition continued to do so until 2003 when the Council was relocated to a new purpose-built structure. During that 1968-2003 period, the former sanctuary found renewed life as a “magnificent performance space with flawless acoustics” hosting a variety of artists and cultural figures such as Allen Ginsberg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Maya Angelou, John Updike, and Patti Smith. Graduations, citizenship ceremonies, cultural and musical events have all taken place in this inspiring auditorium. Since 2003 the building has been empty.

Resource at Risk

For over 22 years, the Smith Baker Center has been vacant. Without a viable use, the City has not allocated resources for its care. In many ways the size, design purposes and quality of the original construction pose real challenges and at the same time, that very size and purpose offer inspiring possibilities for repurposing the space. The City Council, contending with what was viewed as serious life safety threats due to its deteriorating conditions, voted for its demolition in 2024.

What's Happening Now

After community pressure opposing building demolition, the City Council commissioned a study by Gale Associates which called for comprehensive building repairs with an estimated budget of \$4 million. A full rehabilitation of the building is estimated to cost \$17 million.

Inspired to take action, the Smith Baker Preservation Corporation (SBPC) and Allies in Music Education (AME) have raised over \$600,000 in donations and pledges and have submitted a CPA grant application for \$150,000. Together this will fund immediate stabilization to ensure a weathertight enclosure. Two banks have committed loans.