

## Downtown Mobile Alliance, Barton Academy Foundation, Mobile County Public School System

### INNOVATION

The renovation of Barton Academy was undertaken to fulfill several goals, the most important of which was to create a state-of-the-art, public school that would attract families from across the county and would encourage downtown residents with school-age children to remain downtown. Additionally, a school focusing on World Studies would appeal to many of the European families moving to Mobile for employment in the expanding aerospace industrial park two miles from downtown. The preservation of one of Alabama's most significant historic buildings was also desired. These three objectives are significant enough to undertake such a massive, first-of-its-kind project, but the positive impact on the immediately adjacent neighborhood was another important consideration. While Downtown Mobile had experienced major revitalization in recent years, the blocks surrounding Barton Academy had largely been bypassed by any significant investment. A lonely, empty campus comprising an entire city block is a deterrent to risk-averse developers. However, a lively center of education for 230 students and faculty had the potential to attract them to the area.

Most of Barton Academy's electrical, plumbing, and HVAC systems dated from the prior conversion to central offices 50 years earlier; all of them were terribly inefficient, costly, and woefully inadequate to address 21st century technology needs. The Barton Academy Foundation applied for and received a low interest loan from the Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs which offered such incentives for energy efficient and renewable-energy technologies employed in existing buildings. The loan was subsequently forgiven.

### OUTCOME

Shepherding the creation of a new educational institution as a means to downtown revitalization is not for the faint of heart, however, the payoff can be swift and powerful. The blocks of Dauphin Street (Downtown Mobile's primary retail corridor) nearest the vacant Barton Academy were a no-man's land of blight. These blocks separated two very lively nodes of activity directly on either end, discouraging visitors from walking between the two. However, soon after the plans for Barton Academy's resurrection and well before the school opened its doors to students, developers took a new interest in the long-vacant buildings. Since 2015, when renovations began in earnest, 20 new businesses opened, 14 buildings were or are being renovated, and 11 residential units were added.

The increased activity brought on by newly developed buildings surrounding the school directly benefits downtown business owners by drawing more customers. Tax revenue is increased, and neighboring property owners see higher values because the vacant buildings are now generating economic activity. Public education is a general public good, and a high-quality institution such as Barton Academy is especially beneficial to a school system often perceived as substandard.

As a facility operated by the Mobile County Public School System, Barton Academy is self-sustaining with a lifespan that could even surpass its current 130-year existence. Barton's first year enrollment exceeded expectations, and parents are already clamoring to add high school grades so their children will be able to continue their education on the campus.

### EXECUTION

The project was completed on time, under budget, and with an exceptionally high quality of finish. By engaging a tax credit consultant who also owns a CDE, a law firm with expertise in this area, and Novogradac, a national accounting firm with experience in the tax credit industry, we established instant credibility. Fulfilling the many requirements of the National Park Service in order to take advantage of historic tax credits was an arduous process, however once that and the other components of the complex financing scheme were put into place, the project could then move to the school system to execute.

The Mobile County Public School System has a footprint larger than the state of Rhode Island and already operated and maintained nearly 100 school buildings. Because of their experience in managing construction projects, they were able to understand the

complicated capital stack, put the project out to bid, manage the construction process, and furnish the school on time and under budget. Architects hired by the Barton Academy Foundation stayed on to assure the contractors were using the high-quality materials specified and that the fit and finish were of the highest standards.

## **REPRESENTATION**

From the beginning, supporters realized broad partnerships would be necessary. Initially, the historic preservation community led the charge with grass roots education and fundraising events. Once BAF was formed, a formal fundraising plan was developed that involved events and appeals at every donor level. The development/business community joined the effort once they were convinced of the economic impact of the school's reactivation. The school system was an active partner, with the former superintendent creating a draft of the new curriculum and the current commissioners approving necessary contracts. Support came from the Mobile County Commission and the individual members of the Mobile City Council. Ultimately, 750 individuals, corporations, foundations and public entities contributed money, time and influence to the effort. The Downtown Mobile Alliance provided the staff for the Foundation, helping coordinate events, assisting with marketing, applying for grants, and completing the initial historic tax credit paperwork through the NPS review and negotiating design changes.

With 53,000 students (61 percent minority) in 90 schools, MCPSS is the largest system in Alabama. Since BAAWS serves as a magnet school, any student in the system is eligible to take advantage of this world-class educational opportunity. The current enrollment is 47% Black.

## **REPLICATION**

Though complicated, an undertaking to give a publicly owned piece of real estate a new future is replicable. However, if historic tax credits are being used, the new use must be different from the prior use. This worked in the case of Barton Academy since the most recent use had been the central office for the school system. After meeting that requirement, the key is being able to convince funders and the public at large that the project has value and broad benefit. Since fundraising is necessary to finance the conversion, hiring a professional fundraiser and assembling a robust capital campaign committee will be essential.

## **COMPLEXITY/SIMPLICITY**

The challenges were many. No matter how worthy the project, convincing the philanthropic community to fund a public school was a Sisyphean task. There was a concern that the fundraising goal would never be met, so there was great reluctance to commit monies to a project with little likelihood of success. Additionally, because the building was and would remain a public asset, elected bodies with constantly changing faces would be involved in the process all along the way. And then there were the challenges that accompany any project using historic tax credits.

Two key strategies were employed to mitigate the complexities. The first was keeping a solid, consistent, and inspiring vision at the forefront. This unwavering commitment to creating a world-class, state-of-the-art institution in Alabama's oldest public-school building endured through the 10 years of planning and fundraising. Secondly, experts in the fields of finance, fundraising, and design were engaged early on to keep the project moving forward. Ultimately, the notion of reviving this historic landmark for use as a magnet school for Mobile's brightest middle-school students generated enough excitement among donors, large and small, to carry the day.