

Letter to HLC re Baker

Submitted 11.10.20

Dear Members of the Historic Landmark Commission,

I am writing to express my strong support for Historic Zoning of the Baker School site.

I understand that you have received an objection based on the mistaken belief that historic zoning would preclude affordable housing from ever being built at Baker. However, the historic designation would affect only the building and grounds. It would *not* prevent the building's 66,000-square-foot interior from being redesigned for affordable units should the property change hands in the future.

Hyde Park strongly supports affordable housing, and residents have worked to identify areas throughout the neighborhood where it can be readily incorporated. But it is a false choice to pit historic recognition of this one-of-a-kind landmark against affordability. In Austin, I believe we are capable of doing both.

In fact, when the Alamo Drafthouse purchased the property in 2019, the rear portion of the Baker lot, known as Baker Field, was rezoned with neighborhood support to allow for up to 5 stories of residential development, including a 25% affordability component. Unfortunately, in March of 2020, the city decided to buy Baker Field to build a regional detention pond instead.

Luckily, there are many large apartment complexes in close proximity to Baker, which the city could also acquire should it wish to provide permanent deeply affordable housing in this area. Many of these older complexes currently provide "market affordable" housing to the renters who comprise over 70% of Hyde Park residents. In fact, Hyde Park's average rents are substantially lower than other Central and Central East neighborhoods, due to this large supply of older multifamily housing.

But back to Baker. As you are likely aware, Baker School was built in 1911 on the site of the Hyde Park Pavilion in what is now the Hyde Park Local Historic District. The campus was named in honor of DeWitt Clinton Baker, a businessman and author who helped establish public schools in Austin and served as the inspector of schools from 1872 to 1887. Typical of its period, this handsome three-story brick building is traditional and substantial, with generous windows and *bas-relief* brick detailing on the upper façade. The grounds contain historic post oak trees likely planted when the school was built to provide shade for students to play outdoor games.

Many longtime Austinites retain deep ties to Baker, either as former "Baker Bobcats" or through family members who attended or taught there (one neighbor recalls his father sewing green-and-white uniforms for its majorettes and cheerleaders). The building was constructed under the superintendency of A.N. McCallum for whom McCallum High School is named. Baker's former principals include the late Dennis Cowan, namesake of AISD's Cowan Elementary. The Hyde Park Neighborhood Plan lists Baker as one of

five neighborhood sites that should be specifically considered for Historic Landmark status.

During over a century of use, Baker has served the people of Austin as an elementary and junior high school, a regional sixth grade center, a special needs campus for high school students, and an administrative center. It is now the headquarters of an iconic Austin business, the Alamo Drafthouse, which has done a wonderful job restoring and caring for the building and its grounds.

I hope you will act to preserve this important piece of Austin's history by recommending Historic Zoning for the Baker School and its site.

Thank you for your consideration and for your service to our community.

Best,  
Susan Moffat