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A \$2.4 million renovation of the iconic 120-year-old Baxter Library building into a marketing firm's headquarters will let the history of this landmark on Congress Street speak for itself, say developers.

But that begins with some creative destruction.

"We have to bring it back to its original structure; through the years different tenants or owners have changed the original intent of the building, and we're bringing it back to that point, which is what we're doing in the demolition phase right now," Tim Meyer, superintendent of Benchmark construction management firm of Westbrook, said Tuesday during a pause from renovations. "We're going to put in a minimal amount of partitions, so it will be an open concept, lots of color."

The city's historic preservation board reviewed the project last fall and gave its blessing to the restoration effort, noted Deb Andrews, historic preservation program manager for the city.

"They've taken a very sensitive approach to the building and are interested in preserving key features of the interior and the exterior and bringing back some features such as windows that had been replaced previously. We're delighted to see this project undertaken," Andrews said.

Northland Enterprises, a Portland-based development company specializing in historic commercial and multifamily redevelopment, acquired the Baxter Library building and is renovating it into the headquarters for the Via Group, a national advertising and marketing firm and one of Maine's flagship companies.

The tenant is not proposing prominent signage but rather sees the architecture of the building as a "drawing card," Andrews noted.

The Baxter Library building, located at 619 Congress St., was built in 1889 and served as the city library until 1979, according to Northland Enterprises.

"The redevelopment is being financed through a combination of sources including state and federal historic tax credits, a loan from the State's Rural Development Authority,

and an innovative New Markets Tax Credit loan from Bangor Savings Bank and Costal Enterprises," Northland noted in a press release. "In November, the Portland City Council voted unanimously to provide Tax Incremental Financing that allowed additional debt to be used for the project."

"This project will provide badly needed improvements to one of Portland's most iconic and important historic landmarks," said Rex Bell of Northland Enterprises in the company press release. "When we're finished, the building will have upgraded power, telecommunications and safety systems."

The building will also receive historic replica windows and a façade restoration that will include repointing the masonry and cleaning up existing graffiti, Bell noted.

Bell and his partners, Robert C.S. Monks and Josh Benthien, purchased the building from the Maine College of Art, which plans to consolidate its operations within the Porteous building at 522 Congress St., Bell reported. The proceeds from this sale will allow MECA to continue its improvements to the Porteous building's infrastructure, façade and interior, he said.

After a brief stint as MECA's main library, the Baxter Library building has since served as a mix of gallery space, classroom, studio space and administrative offices.

"This project benefits everyone involved," said Monks. "It will help revitalize the surrounding portion of Congress Street and will add the economic spark of 70 professionals working out of the building every day. It's also helping Via and MECA achieve their long-term goals."

The renovation falls under the jurisdiction of a historic district that the city created last year. Last March, the Portland City Council unanimously voted to designate a portion of Congress Street and its immediate surroundings as the Congress Street Historic District, which became effective on April 15. This district requires landowners to consult with the city's historic preservation office about construction and renovations to designated buildings in the district. The Baxter Library building is no exception.

"We're working closely with the city on it as well as the state and federal historical societies," Meyer said.

"It's highly complex and very fast track, it's a blending of the old with the new, and done by some very good architects," he said.

Archetype Architects and Scott Simons Architects, both of Portland, were hired to plan the restoration.

"They're going to bring back the original building as well as blend in some modern architecture," Meyer said. "I think it will be very interesting and very unique."

Via's 70 employees will move into the building once the renovations are complete, but the building's flexible layout will allow for significant workforce growth in the future, Bell said.

Jan Beitzer, executive director of the Portland Downtown District, said the benefit of this renovation is twofold: "We're very excited about the Baxter Building, one, for just simply being put on the tax rolls, that's helpful to everybody, but bringing jobs, employees, to that stretch of Congress Street will be very helpful to businesses in the immediate area."

Also, the Via Group is internationally known and will occupy a "signature building," she noted.

"I'm sure we'll reap rewards in public relations because their offices are here in Portland," Beitzer said.