

## **Duluth Armory gets a million bucks**

By: Christa Lawler, Duluth News Tribune

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A historic building that 10 years ago was slated for a date with a wrecking ball has gotten a pledge of \$1 million from an anonymous donor who wants to add vitality to downtown Duluth.

It's another step toward making the Duluth Armory, on London Road at the far eastern edge of downtown, a usable public space. The Duluth Armory Arts and Music Center, the nonprofit that bought the facility for \$1 in 2003, also announced Friday a partnership with the Alexander Company, a Madison-based developer that already has historic renovation credibility in this area: They restored the Irving School about 20 years ago.

"We've got a couple of good things happening," said Mark Poirer, the vice president of the armory group's board of directors. "Our group is very, very excited. We had a board meeting (Thursday) night where there were moments of giddiness."

The key to all of this, said preservation expert and armory board member Carolyn Sundquist, is the state historic tax law legislation that passed in April 2010. It means a 20 percent break on project costs — in addition to the 20 percent break offered by the federal program.

That can lure investors who buy the value of the tax credits, use the credits on their own taxes and pass cash on to the project.

One of the caveats here is that the building must retain its defining features, Sundquist said — meaning the space formerly known as the drill hall must maintain the look of a drill hall.

The Duluth Armory, a 117,000-square-foot facility built in 1915, was both the home to the National Guard's 125th Field Artillery, part of the first division in Europe during World War II, as well as the place where a young Bob Dylan saw Buddy Holly perform — a moment he mentioned as inspiration when receiving a Grammy Award in 1998.

Others who have performed in the space include Johnny Cash, Louis Armstrong, Hank Williams, John Philip Sousa, Will Rogers, Bob Hope, the Osmonds, the Harlem Globetrotters and composer-pianist Sergei Rachmaninoff.

The armory group is looking for tenants to fill the 35,000 square feet of space once called the head house. Plenty of ideas have surfaced in recent years, including student housing for the University of Minnesota Duluth, coffee shops, bookstores, and retail and office space.

Filling that space is an important part of moving the project forward.

“Our projections show that a thorough historic rehabilitation of the building, coupled with a strong tenant partner and neighborhood involvement, will develop a revitalized Armory that can be both an arts and economic engine for the city of Duluth,” said Jonathan Beck, the development project manager in a news release from The Alexander Company. “With the financial backing and support of city officials, citizens and the business community of Duluth, these plans will become a reality.”

Part of the next phase includes fundraising, but the donation takes a hefty chunk out of the \$1.9 million that the Alexander Company had set as a fundraising goal.

The donor said in a statement: “This pledge makes sense for many reasons. This is a wonderful project that will add to the vitality of Duluth’s downtown and allow millions of dollars in tax credits and other funding to come to our community that otherwise would not. We are now significantly on the path to making this project come to life and are confident that Duluth residents will support this project with subsequent donations.”

The armory group is also moving forward with the development of a Music Resource Center, a space for teens modeled on one the Dave Matthews Band started in Charlottesville, Va., where high school-aged kids can jam, record and learn the administrative side of the music industry — a nod to the venue’s place in music history.

Ten years ago, the armory was slated for demolition because of safety concerns. The Armory Arts and Music Center bought it from the city of Duluth in 2003, with plans that included celebrating local music, an upscale restaurant and a military museum.

A New Orleans-based developer got on board in the mid-2000s, but Historic Restoration Inc. eventually bowed out in favor of focusing on their home community after Hurricane Katrina.