

# The renaissance man

Written by Christina Ritchie Rogers



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**Justin Dionne's diverse experiences and unique expertise made him the choice to lead the Cornelius Arts Center effort.**

**CORNELIUS, N.C. — The new executive director of the Cornelius Arts Center is a former hay baler.**

**And food server.**

**And HVAC serviceman.**

**And actor.**

**He is also the man responsible for turning an historic Salisbury warehouse and its surrounding area into a thriving performing arts center and cultural destination.**

**Justin Dionne, 32, believes his early, diverse — if disparate — experiences make him uniquely qualified for his current role, leading the development and construction of a Cornelius-based arts and cultural hub for the region.**

**"The arts need to be connected to their communities, and through all of my different experiences, I've participated in and come to understand the idea of community," Dionne said last week.**

A Salisbury native, from 2012 to 2016 Dionne served as managing art director at Lee Street Theatre, the anchor of the Salisbury-area transformation. While at Lee Street, he curated five seasons and led a capital campaign to renovate the space — a task he managed to complete in fewer than two years. He also developed programming to drive tourism to the area. In 2014 he received the James A. Dunn Award, named after a former Salisbury town commissioner, for his "exceptional contribution to the redevelopment of downtown Salisbury." He credits much of his success to his ability to connect with the community and bring people together through their interest in and love of the arts. That, and "sheer force of will," one of Dionne's defining personality traits.

"I'm passionate about how we connect through the arts and how they tell our stories," he told the Citizen. "That's how I get others excited about them."

Fostering that excitement and motivating community members to become stakeholders in the arts center project will be a key part of Dionne's role, but he isn't starting from scratch as he did in Salisbury. Since the Cornelius project was first envisioned four years ago, already it has seen support from community members as well as town commissioners and staff members.

In 2013, voters approved a \$20 million bond package, of which \$4 million was designated for redevelopment in the "Old Town" part of Cornelius east of I-77. In early January, the town spent \$1.5 million to purchase 1.85 acres adjacent to the police department headquarters, which will serve as the site for the future building. And just last week, the project received \$100,000 from the state, secured by Rep. John Bradford, a former Cornelius town commissioner. That money will go toward hiring an architect this summer and developing design concepts, said Greg Wessling, chief operating officer for the Morris Group of companies, who serves as board chairman and president of the arts center.

The project will be a public-private partnership; the town will serve as owner/manager for the center, which will be run independently by the staff and board of the recently created 501(c)(3) organization.

### **Economic engine**

The arts center is intended to be a hub for artistic and cultural programming as well as an overall economic driver for the area. Parallel and complimentary to plans for the arts center are plans under way for a proposed downtown arts district — a mixed-use cultural destination with galleries, theaters, music venues and public gathering spaces, as well as retail and recreational establishments. Cornelius Planning Director Wayne Herron said the announcement of the coming arts center has sparked significant interest from private developers.

"I was amazed at how quickly we heard from private investors," Herron said. "On the private side, we're seeing interest from businesses that would go along well with art programming, like restaurants and microbreweries. On the public side, our appointed boards have gotten very excited about the possibilities the center brings, and they're working to get ahead of the private investment to ensure that it's done the Cornelius way, not only in architectural style but also with infrastructure needs in mind."

Dionne, too, is excited about the possibilities for development because it would be beneficial for all involved including the artists in the community and their patrons.

"Artists tend to be a bit siloed and don't always think like entrepreneurs," Dionne said. "They need to understand that a thriving arts and cultural district fosters success for all involved, not competition. It's the 'rising tide raises all ships' concept."

He saw this first-hand in Salisbury. The renovation of Lee Street Theatre attracted new businesses such as pubs, restaurants and even a farmer's market to the area.

"It's about bettering the community as a whole," Dionne said. "It's a big picture. To be successful you have to be able to see that big picture, and I can do that."

### **The right leader**

Hiring an executive director was a top priority for the board, and it employed Capital Development Company, a reputable fundraising consulting firm based in Winston-Salem, to help lead an extensive national search. "The board knew we had to get this one right," said Wessling.

The director search yielded more than 80 qualified applicants, a number that was pared down to 29 and then, painstakingly, to 10, he said. Each of the 10 finalists went through a lengthy interview process with the six-member search committee, that ultimately chose three finalists.

Each finalist had a three-hour meeting with the search committee, a social reception with the full board, and the next day made a formal presentation to the board outlining what they would do within the first 90 days and the following nine months.

"The board was that committed to getting it right," Wessling said, and after the exhaustive process, "we're absolutely sure that Justin was the right one for the job."

The list of qualities that make Dionne the right fit for the job is long, Wessling said, and includes his history of fundraising, his experience in the arts, his familiarity with the region and his success in Salisbury. He earned a B.A. in theater arts from Catawba College and later pursued a graduate degree in theater management on full scholarship at Florida State University, but left the program to accept the Cornelius position. And beyond his resumé and track record, Dionne's passion, energy and commitment to the cause led to a unanimous decision by the board.

"He's magnetic. People can't tell him no even if they want to," Wessling said.

"He's a tremendous fit for the job for a variety of reasons," Herron agreed. "He's got a good understanding of the need for engagement, not just with people here but also with Mooresville, Huntersville and the region, and he has a lot of positive energy. For an effort like this, you've got to have that energy."

Though chosen to direct the effort, Dionne emphasizes that development of the arts center is a community project, and it must remain that way — by the community, for the community.

"It has to be built by everybody together," he said. "This community, this region, we have a big job ahead of us."