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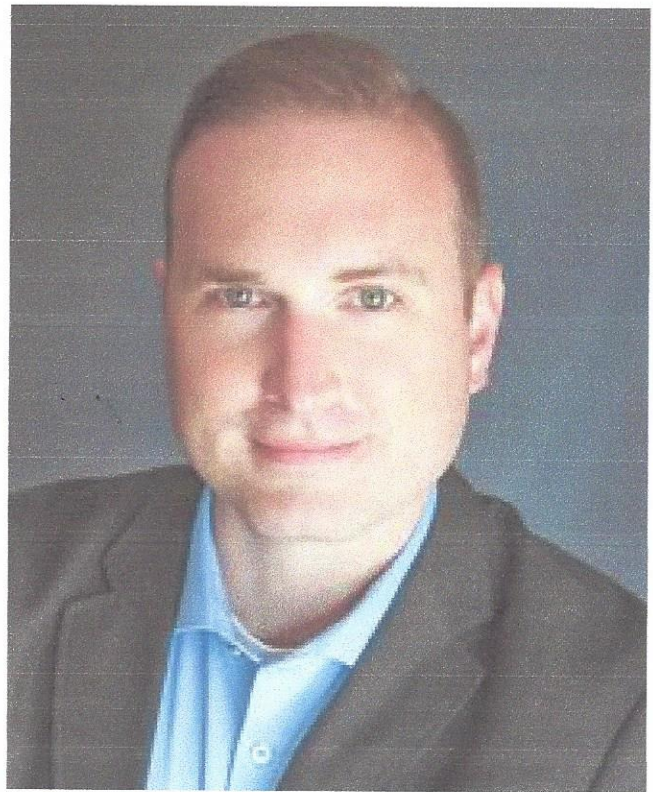
Cornelius names arts center director

Jim McNally Jun 15, 2017

CORNELIUS – After a national search that included more than 80 candidates from across the country, the Cornelius Arts Center committee has named an executive director.

Leaders of the center, which will be the centerpiece of an arts district in the town, chose Justin Dionne to be its first chief administrator.

Dionne, a 32-year-old Rowan County native and Catawba College graduate, is the former artistic director of Lee Street Theatre in Salisbury. During his time there, Dionne led a \$1.5 million capital campaign to renovate a historic warehouse into a performing arts center.



Justin Dionne

He left the post last year to take graduate-level theater management courses at Florida State University.

Prior to his time at Lee Street, Dionne was marketing director for Piedmont Players Theatre in Salisbury.

His professional career includes a mix of community development, nonprofit arts management, downtown development, tourism and work with arts council boards – tasks not unlike those that lay ahead of him in Cornelius.

Cornelius Mayor Pro Tem Woody Washam has been closely involved in the Arts Center project and with the search for its executive director. He said the board of directors could do no better than to have hired Dionne.

“Hiring Justin has been the real pivot point of what we want to do to move this project forward,” Washam said and explained that the Arts Center could cost somewhere between \$10 million and \$15 million.

“And not only has Justin been involved in getting a project like this built, he has been able to make it self-supporting, financially,” Washam said.

Dionne said he spends most of his first week on the job meeting with community leaders and otherwise getting acclimated.

“I’ve been kind of drinking from the firehose getting to know community and the people,” he said. “But it’s an exciting opportunity, and I’m honored to be a part of it.”

Dionne said arts – and the varied ways they are demonstrated – not only contribute to the quality of life for residents but has a dollars-and-cents impact.

“Projects like this are an economic engine,” he said and added that he and others connected to the project have a lot of work ahead of them before that engine is roaring.

“It’s not going to be easy, and it’s not going to happen overnight,” he said. “But this project is going to get people excited.”

Regarding a timeline, Dionne said he is hopeful that groundbreaking on the center can

begin in late 2018 or early 2019.

“But if someone writes a big check tomorrow, we can get started a lot sooner,” he said.

Washam, a native and lifelong resident of Cornelius, said the Arts Center is something that will not only bring together the Cornelius as a town but be a destination point for the area.

“I think this will unite this town like nothing we ever done before,” he said. “And we really want to see it as a regional center.”

In 2013 Cornelius residents approved a \$4 million bond for use on downtown redevelopment projects. After research and debate, town leaders zeroed in on a community arts center.

The town purchased 1.85 acres in downtown Cornelius adjacent to the police station on Catawba Avenue and agreed to an owner/manager business model with the Arts Center, which will be operated by a nonprofit group. Dionne is the executive director of that nonprofit.

Dionne, said he can see the site from the apartment he is renting in the Antiquity development, just down Catawba Avenue.

“It’s going to be the centerpiece of the Art District,” he said. “And it’s the beacon of the partnership that is going to make it happen.”

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