



The town of Cornelius purchased the old Farmers Co. warehouse property on Catawba Avenue just west of police headquarters for \$1.5 million for the future site of the Cornelius Arts Center. **Kate Stevens**

LAKE NORMAN & MOORESVILLE

Will Cornelius become the No-Da of the north?

BY KATE STEVENS
Correspondent

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The proposed Cornelius Arts Center, a multi-million dollar project featuring a glamorous arts hub and district with restaurants, galleries and shops along Catawba Avenue, could grow to become a popular cultural destination, said Justin Dionne, the art center's newly-hired executive director.

"I think in five to six years that downtown is going to be the next NoDa-type area," said Dionne, speaking of Charlotte's artsy North Davidson Street neighborhood.

Dionne and and Robert Bush, president of the Arts & Science Council, discussed the economic impact the arts industry has on the state at a recent Lake Norman Chamber of Commerce presentation.

“

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Woody Washam, Cornelius mayor pro-tem

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Dionne was recently hired by the Cornelius Arts and Community Center, the nonprofit organization running the arts center, and was selected from more than 80 applicants from across the country, said Cornelius Commission Mayor Pro-Tem Woody Washam.

The former managing artistic director of Lee Street Theatre in Salisbury, Dionne said he helped grow the theater into the centerpiece of the town's Rail Walk Arts District.

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Salisbury's nonprofit agencies, local businesses and economic development groups came together to build the town's art district, he said.

"Everyone worked together to make these projects happen," Dionne said. "I mention that because that's what's going to need to happen here."

The proposed Cornelius Arts Center is a public-private endeavor.

Cornelius residents in 2013 approved a \$20.4 million bond package of which \$4 million was earmarked for town center redevelopment including the arts center.

Last year, the town agreed to purchase the old Farmers Co. warehouse property just west of police headquarters as the art center's future site for \$1.5 million.

Dionne declined to discuss any fundraising sources or project estimates.

There are "internal" figures of how much funds are needed for the project but "nothing to share publicly" yet, Dionne said.

This fall, the board plans to engage a fundraising consultant with the hopes of seeing a public fundraising campaign beginning about a year from now, Dionne said.

Dionne said the Cornelius Arts Center is a "temporary placeholder name" that could change when a lead "giver" is found during the fundraising campaign.

The new name would also reflect the area's regional appeal, Dionne said.

The town has invested heavily in the arts center as a project incubator, Washam said.

“There are significant funds to be raised not only to build it and build it out like we want to see it, but to run it,” said Washam. “You don’t open the doors of a facility like this and expect all your working capital to be in place on day one. We’re talking about significant campaigning the likes of which this community has never seen. The likes of which the Lake Norman area has never seen. We’re keeping our fingers crossed and our hopes are high, but there’s a lot of work to do.”

Early artist renderings of the Cornelius Arts Center released in February during a presentation by Greg Wessling, chairman of the Cornelius Arts and Community Center board of directors, call for a three-story building with a basement for parking, a 7,400 square-foot ground floor ceramic studio; a flexible-use theater accommodating theatrical, dance and live music performances; and a special events room with a kitchen.

The center will also be capable of hosting catered weddings, parties and corporate events and offer public space for art education and exhibits, Dionne said.

“We are going to be an arts center but also a community center,” said Dionne. “It’s got to be able to serve the communities in the Lake Norman area.”

The arts center would not be a “producing organization” like the Davidson Community Players that builds its own sets, holds its own auditions and directs its own productions, he said.

Instead, the arts center would enhance the artists already in the area, Dionne said.

“What we want to do is be able to serve as a catalyst and offer these awesome cultural organizations a place to perform that may be a step up from where they were,” Dionne said.

Cafes, shops and galleries would be part of an arts district along Catawba Avenue, Dionne said.

Dionne declined to give a construction timeline for the project but said he hopes to have the project’s architect in place soon.

Wessling has said previously that groundbreaking is expected to begin in the third quarter of 2018 with the grand opening set for one year later.

The arts center would likely be an economic boon for the Lake Norman region.

According to the 2015 Arts & Economic Prosperity Five report, which studies the economic impact of nonprofit arts and cultural organizations and their audiences, the arts and cultural sector stimulated \$2.1 billion in direct economic activity in North Carolina, Dionne said.

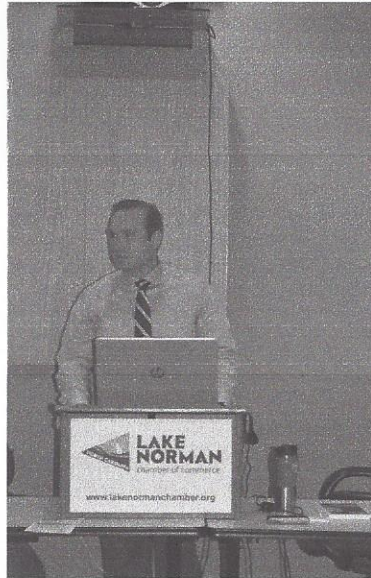
The same study said the arts supported 72,000 full-time equivalent jobs and said audiences spent more than \$1.2 billion statewide in 2015, Dionne said.

Each in-state resident spent \$27.95 in the community for each artistic show, not including the price of admission, and each out-of-state resident spent \$61.86 in the community, Dionne said the study revealed.

Bush said the Arts & Science Council will release information on the economic impact of nonprofit arts organizations for various counties, including Mecklenburg County, on Sept. 15.

The Arts & Science Council provides advocacy, cultural education programs, fundraising, grant making, public art, workshops and trainings for the Charlotte-Mecklenburg area.

Kate Stevens is a freelance writer: katebethstevens@icloud.com.



Justin Dionne, executive director of the Cornelius Arts Center, hopes the proposed arts center will be a "cultural destination." **Kate Stevens**

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