



## Cornelius site-clearing event to mark milestone for Cain Center

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by Lee Sullivan



Final architectural renderings for the Cain Center for the Arts were released this summer, and site clearing work for the regional facility begins Sept. 10. /Courtesy of Cain Center for the Arts

**CORNELIUS** – A seven-year-old concept to establish a regional hub for artistic performances and cultural gatherings in downtown Cornelius will soon transform to reality.

On Sept. 10 – during four separate celebrations orchestrated to comply with COVID-19 limits on group gatherings – ceremonies will be held marking the start of demolition and site-preparation work for the Cain Center for the Arts.

The planned 30,000-square-foot facility will include a 400-seat theater, classrooms and studios, a gallery and other indoor event space along with a 15,000-square-foot community green space for outdoor performances and a 7,500-square-foot outdoor plaza. The Cain Center is envisioned to host a variety of performances, public gatherings and educational programs and become the hub of art and

cultural events for the entire Lake Norman region, and a catalyst for revival and new investments in the town's historic downtown area.

The seed for the center was planted in 2013 when Cornelius earmarked \$4 million in municipal bond money for the project. As the vision developed for the \$25 million facility, Cornelius residents Ericka and Bill Cain provided a \$5 million boost that made them the facility's namesake and pushed the first wave of fundraising into overdrive.

A \$500,000 contribution from the Louise Cashion family, a \$1 million commitment from Mecklenburg County, a strong and steady core of supporters in the Cain Center Founders' Society and a matching-funds pledge of up to \$250,000 from Aquesta Bank have been part of a regional campaign that surpassed the \$17 million mark in July and is nearing, according to Cain Center for the Arts Executive Director Justin Dionne, the \$17.5 million plateau.

And next week's ceremonies signaling the start of work at the site, Dionne said, also represent the kickoff of a final-phase push for more widespread involvement in the fundraising campaign

"This is a big step for us, and a big launch for our public campaign," Dionne said of the upcoming ceremonies. "I believe when work on the site begins, a large group of people who have been waiting to get involved will realize this dream is happening, and this is their chance to be part of it."

Dionne said from the outset, the Cain Center was envisioned as an asset for everyone in the Lake Norman region, and ceremonies to commemorate the start of site preparation work – originally planned for May, but delayed by the pandemic – are a reminder that "now's the time to show your support."



A rendering of the gallery that will be part of the Cain Center for the Arts. /Courtesy of Cain Center for the Arts

Dionne acknowledged COVID-19 uncertainties made the first half of 2020 a "tough time to be raising money," but the campaign experienced strong support in July and August and he believes demolition and site work will continue the fundraising momentum.

"Our hope," he said, "is that when people see the work begin, they see those blue buildings (prefabricated warehouses on the property) disappear, it will be the motivation they've been waiting

for to give and get involved.”

He said a vibrant fundraising effort during demolition – expected to take 90 to 120 days primarily due to the “selective demolition” approach applied to preserve and salvage pieces from the historic Cornelius Cotton Gin also on the property – and continued progress toward the \$25 million goal in early 2021 could allow work on the Center to begin by late spring.

Construction is expected to take 16 to 18 months, Dionne said, which could allow for a grand opening celebration during the holiday season in late 2022.

He added that while the campaign intentionally adopted a lower-key approach as the pandemic evolved, it’s important now to demonstrate plans are in place and to celebrate progress made toward making the Cain Center a reality.

“It’s an uncertain time,” Dionne said, “but it’s also vital to keep moving forward and to emphasize to those who have been waiting that now’s the time. We want everybody to be a part of this. We need them to be involved. The Center is for everyone and, at some point, we’re all going to be getting back together, and this will be the place for that.”

## **Information and involvement**

There are multiple ways to join the Cain Center for the Arts campaign. Aquesta Bank’s matching funds campaign is ongoing and there are also opportunities to purchase various sizes of commemorative, customized bricks that will be part of the Center. Naming rights for prominent sections of the future facility are also available.

Complete details about donation options and the vision for the Cain Center for the Arts are accessible at [cainarts.org](http://cainarts.org).