

Physical steps commence as Cain Center closes in on funding goal

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by Doug Coats



Mike Griffin begins the demolition process to clear the lot that will house the Cain Center for the Arts. /Doug Coats

CORNELIUS – The first physical signs of work on the \$25 million Cain Center for the Arts are now visible in downtown Cornelius.

During outdoor ceremonies Thursday, Sept. 10, an excavator began to tear down the first of three buildings on 1.8 acres off Catawba Avenue. The milestone comes at a point when the future regional arts center has raised \$17.2 million and is looking for the community to help reach the finish line.

When Cain Executive Director Justin Dionne was hired in 2017, he said getting to this stage “was just a straight dream,” but now the community can observe the reality that will become a 400-seat theatre, art galleries and outdoor concert space in 2022.

“It’s huge. It’s very energizing at the same time,” he said. “We hired architects in the first month, and we’re finally getting to see some movement. It’s very motivating.”

Stakeholders from throughout the north Mecklenburg region and county leaders celebrated the shift into the demolition stage.

“It truly represents an attempt by the Cain Center board and town of Cornelius to turn this into a regional project which will serve this community for many years to come,” Cornelius Mayor Woody Washam said during a speech. “The economic impact of this facility will be transformational to this town and this region. When you put a \$25 million center in the heart of the region, it’s going to make a difference. It already has made a difference, and will continue to happen to this day.”



Cornelius Mayor Woody Washam (right) speaks beside Cain Center board chairman Greg Wessling. /Doug Coats

Dionne said the demolition process – an in-kind donation from Cornelius’ Mike Griffin estimated at \$75,000 – will take 90 to 120 days. The two blue buildings on the property’s eastern end of the property will turn to rubble first, with the old cotton gin getting a more delicate touch. There are plans for the Cain Center to incorporate salvaged materials from what was once a town centerpiece.

“The cotton gin will take much longer, since we’re trying to save pieces of lumber,” Dionne said. “We want to make sure we do it right and do it carefully.”

The new facility is named for Cornelius residents Bill and Ericka Cain, who made a \$5 donation two years ago. Bill Cain said that money was moved from his children’s inheritance.

“Before we did this, we talked to our children and said, ‘This is what we’re thinking for your inheritance,’” Bill Cain said. “Every one of them said, ‘Do it,’ and were enthusiastic about it and they’ve given since then.”

In 2013, the town passed a \$4 million bond to kick-start the center's planning. Washam praised the \$1 million commitment from Mecklenburg County in July, which was approved unanimously by the board of commissioners.

"We're real proud of that," Washam said. "We might see you at some time down the road."

Since, a brick campaign has proven to be prosperous in fundraising, with \$20,000 worth of them being purchased in the first 10 days of September.

Dionne hopes the demolition is what motivates the community to provide the donations needed to fill the final funding gap.

"This doesn't mean we're done," Dionne said. "If you're running a race, or at some point in a long ride, you've got to eat something, you need that energy to finish the ride. Today is hopefully is that shot of energy that keeps us going even more and gets the public energized about jumping on board."

Cain Center Timeline

Nov. 2013: Cornelius approves \$4 million in bonds for redevelopment

June 2017: Justin Dionne named executive director

May 2018: Initial architectural renderings released

Sept. 2018: Bill and Ericka Cain donate \$5 million, assume name of center

May 2020: Final renderings released

July 2020: Mecklenburg County commits \$1 million

Sept. 2020: Demolition begins

Jan. 2021: Cain Center to assume town arts programs

Early 2021: Construction to begin

Late 2022: Opening