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Cornelius Arts Center intends to become regional fixture

Cassie Fambro Jan 18, 2018

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CORNELIUS – 2018 is poised to be a defining year for what is now known as the Cornelius Arts Center, scheduled to be completed in 2020 in downtown.

But it's not just going to service Cornelius, and the identifier will hopefully be shed soon.

"We really want to be a regional arts center," Executive Director Justin Dionne said.

Dionne said the process to search for a name is underway, and the goal is to have that completed this year.

The center has been gaining momentum since October when world-renowned architect Malcolm Holzman was named the lead planner along with Charlotte's own C-Design. Holzman expressed his vision to the Cornelius Town Board, explaining the importance of maintaining the sense of community in the project and facilitating the town's needs in an exceptional design.

"I think it will do something quite spectacular for your community," Holzman told the town board in early October.

And that's exactly what the Town of Cornelius, and Dionne, want. Dionne and his team completed a survey in the fall that gave them greater insight into what Lake Norman wants out of an arts center.

He said the survey, conducted online and garnering more than 1,000 results, yielded a few surprises.

"We got 48 pages of data," Dionne said.

Out of the responses generated, the survey showed a high interest in performing arts and a lower interest in paying for visual arts.

The research also revealed that residents are interested in midweek entertainment and not just events held on Fridays and Saturdays.

One of the direct results was that the designs will now include a larger theater than originally thought.

In the earlier planning stages, a theater was called for but one that held only approximately 250 spaces. Now, the plan is for one that seats upward of 500 people.

"People indicated that they are eager to support the performing arts," Dionne said.

That also means they can draw larger acts with reasonably-priced seat tickets.

"More seats means more flexibility," Dionne said.

Holzman specializes in flexible spaces, which could yield even more opportunity for the arts center. One of the theater options that Holzman typically designs is movable seating in a theater that opens up more floor space. That could mean venue space for weddings or other large events.

“We are here to be a space that is alive and part of the community,” Dionne said.

That space may be more of a campus than just a single building, encompassing the Oak Street Mill area.

“We would really like to bring this area together as an arts district,” Dionne said, pointing to the popular 2nd Friday Street Festival, which showcases local artists, vendors and hosts musicians the second Friday of each month in Cornelius. He said that using that outdoor space in conjunction with the arts center would cement the area as an arts hub.

He also explained that he hopes the arts center is a catalyst for Cornelius, the center of a vibrant arts district that draws people from all over not just the Lake Norman area but from Charlotte as well.

Dionne pointed to Charlotte’s NoDa and South End and to other cities with unique suburbs like Atlanta and Washington, D.C., and how they have their own cultural identities.

“We want to be that regional anchor here,” he said.

The \$20 million project is still in the design phase, and Dionne said he expects to be able to show the public renderings in early summer.