

New center initiates arts district talk

Written by [Andrew Warfield](#)



Courtesy Town of Cornelius

CORNELIUS, N.C. -- During his Oct. 3 presentation to the Cornelius Town Board of Commissioners, Greg Wessling, the chairman of the board-appointed arts and cultural center working group, told the board that a new facility to be built downtown using \$4 million in voter-approved bonds must be self-sustaining. That means the center's programming of exhibits, classes, studios and live performances must generate enough revenue to cover its operating costs.

The mandate led to the concept of developing downtown Cornelius into an arts and cultural destination aided by the creation of an art district overlay that would encourage complementary businesses as well as architectural standards to create a suitable, catalytic environment.

Building an arts center and creating an arts district are two separate, but parallel, efforts. Commissioners provided approval to transition the arts center working group into a board of directors of a new 501(c)(3) organization along with an advisory board that would include town staff and elected officials. Its initial tasks are to pursue an executive director, which Wessling said is a

necessary precursor to raising funds to augment the \$4 million in bond funding. The size and scope of the center, Wessling told the board, would depend solely on how much the group can raise over the next two years.

Meanwhile, commissioners will continue to consider Town Planner Wayne Herron's proposal to apply an arts district overlay that would also include a "festival street" concept on Catawba Avenue for a few blocks near Town Hall. The arts district would be intended to support the self-sufficiency of the art center and also to augment the "Old Town Cornelius" branding efforts already under way.

"A number of advisory boards are asking when they can begin to help with the arts district and arts center," Herron told commissioners. "This is a way to empower upwards of 100 more people to be involved."

Elements for planning an arts district, Herron told the board, should include identifying unique areas within the district that have shared character, identifying gateways with opportunities for public art and dynamic streetscapes, identifying opportunities for streetscape improvements, facade improvements of existing structures, identifying sites for redevelopment and new development, and examining zoning standards for uses to permit and deny others identified as non-complementary.

Wessling had just previously told commissioners that, in order to achieve success, the arts center must create an identity based on a specific medium — such as ceramics — and focus on what it does best. Flexible exhibit and performance spaces will encourage a variety of programming, but the center, like others the working group visited, must have a "hook."

Whatever the arts center can't do well, Wessling said, is where the arts district comes in to complement the center's anchor programming.

Among Herron's recommendations are:

- Request Land Development Code Advisory Board prepare text for an Arts Overlay District.
- Hold a joint meeting of the Cornelius PARC Department, Historic Preservation Committee, Architectural Review Board and Planning Board to develop goals and ideas for establishment and direction of a proposed arts district.
- Host a public charrette to share ideas and receive public input on proposed arts district in November or December.
- Present ideas and proposals to Town Board for consideration in December or January.

Festival street

To pull the elements together into a cohesive unit, Herron presented commissioners with the concept of converting the stretch of Catawba Avenue between Mulberry/Meridian streets and Oak Street into a "festival street."

A festival street, also known as an open street or shared space, has the following characteristics:

- Blurs hierarchy between vehicles and pedestrians/bicyclists .
- Encourages slow traffic speeds.

- Provides for flexible use within a street right-of-way.
- Creates an environment that can be closed for temporary events and festivals.

Festival streets are typically designed with materials that encourage foot traffic as well as allow for vehicular use, and Herron said in the case of Catawba Avenue in the area of town hall and the police department would complement, and even bring focus to, the arts center. Town staff has applied for, and has received, the North Carolina Department of Commerce Rural Economic Development Division for \$94,340 in funding for detailed design and surveying costs for the festival street.

“Those are the kind of reports we like to have when you come to us with money,” Mayor Chuck Travis said following the unanimous vote to accept the grant.

Commissioners will consider the details of the proposed arts district in the coming weeks.

Catawba Avenue near Town Hall and the Police Department as a festival street. The proposed new arts and cultural center is in the background on left.

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