



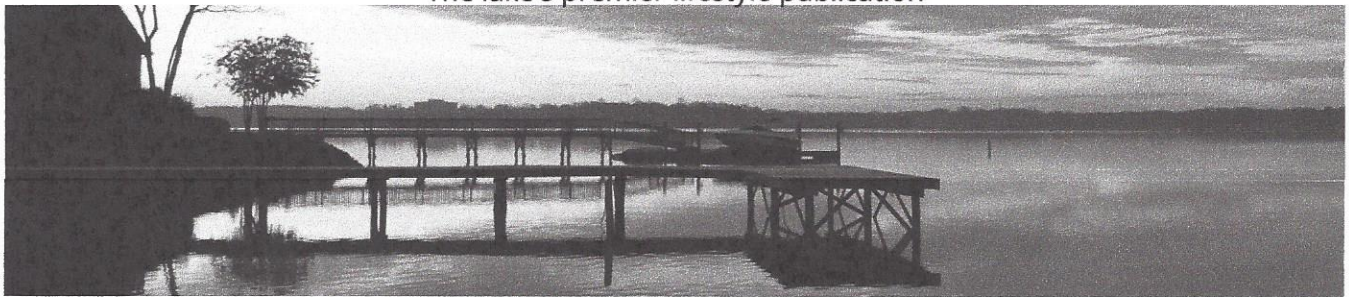
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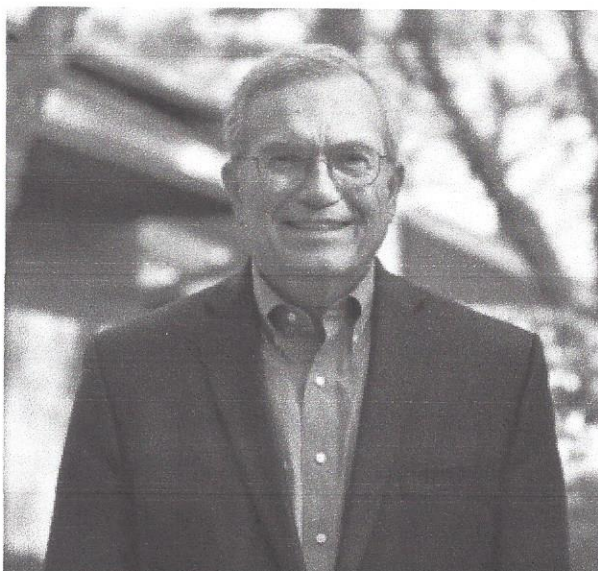
## A Center for Arts and Community

by Christina Ritchie Rogers (<http://www.lakenormanmagazine.com/?author=27>) on December 1, 2016  
(<http://www.lakenormanmagazine.com/?p=1088>)

Since its official kickoff in October, the three-year project to build the Cornelius Arts and Community Center continues to drive forward. According to plans, the center should be completed in the fourth quarter of 2019 and will serve as an arts-based hub for the community and the region. Some believe its influence could extend even farther.



The project was first envisioned in 2013, when voters approved a \$20 million bond package of which \$4 million was designated for building some sort of inter-town arts and cultural center in the “Old Town” part of Cornelius (east of I-77). A little more than a year ago, Cornelius Mayor Chuck Travis assembled a strategic working group of more than a dozen local residents and community leaders to examine options, research center models, and begin realizing the goal. The group gave its final report to the Town Board Oct. 3, the center’s new board met for the first time the following week, and it has been full steam ahead ever since.



Greg Wessling, chief operating officer for the Morris Group of companies, served as chair for the strategic working group and now is a founding board member for the center. He shares with us the vision for the center and its potential for impact and influence both in our region and far beyond it.

**What is the board’s vision for the center?**

The vision is a center that is available for public use 24/7. It will be open on a daily basis, and there will be something of interest there for young and old, and all in between. It will provide education and enjoyment opportunities for our youth, as well as young adults and senior citizens.

We [the strategic working group] did a community survey [as part of our research] and more than 400 people told us what they thought. What they thought and what we envisioned matched up pretty well. We did learn some things—there were things we thought were pretty neat that the community at large wasn't quite as excited about, and there were things that we left off our initial list until the community said, 'don't forget about these.' One was a lecture series, and we think that's a pretty cool idea. We believe that a fine center in an arts district would attract experts from all over.

**What is it about Cornelius that makes it *the* place to house this sort of center? Of all the places it could be, why Cornelius?**

I think it's largely because Cornelius has the appetite for it. When the town and community branched out to consider and support the idea of not just an arts center, but an arts *and community* center, and then an *entire arts district*, that was a pretty clear signal that the town, the leadership of the town, and the community really want this arts center housed in Cornelius.

And interestingly, the infrastructure supports it. Where Main Street and East Catawba Avenue come together, we have the ability to put it in place. We don't have to divide and conquer or demolish and destroy. There's plenty of opportunity right there.

The idea that it can be a part of Old Town, where we can incorporate the history of Cornelius, bring in the mill environment and the cotton gin, and incorporate some of the businesses that exist and have already expressed interest in getting involved...it's really exciting.

There's a lot of moving parts that have to align properly for something like this to truly work, and it appears that Cornelius has the ability to bring that together, and Cornelius has the desire to want it to be together. People are stopping us [board members] and asking to hear more about the project—that seems to happen every day. So there's a groundswell of community interest, and I think that will make it work for Cornelius.

**What sort of discussions have you had with neighboring towns about the**

## **center?**

We've had discussions with Davidson, Mooresville, Huntersville, and Troutman, and there's a real interest. The idea is that it would be for the Lake Norman region, but I'll tell you what: Some of the things that we're considering and others are asking us to consider would make it even larger—a center for the southeast region.

Cornelius would be the fortunate recipient of the location, but I think the involvement will be a much broader community than the residents of Cornelius alone—and [the residents] are excited about that. The idea is that it might bring people from all over the Southeast or, who knows, it could be the United States, North America—it just depends on the venue.

For example, we already have strong ceramics offerings through the existing arts center—it's too small, and too old, and there aren't enough facilities or equipment, but we do have a ceramics presence there and it's very, very popular. So Cornelius and the surrounding area have already told us they like ceramics. As we've gotten more deeply ingrained in just how big that could be, we find that there's an international following for ceramics, and our thinking is that with a new facility we could have a continuing education program that would be supportive of ceramics professionals. The program could house them as artists in residence, and they could teach as artists in residence. Something like this could bring people from all over the United States together at certain times of year to share their knowledge and skill and their passion for the craft. It doesn't appear that a lot of people have tried that, and that excites us.

**I understand you aim to hire an executive director by late 2016 or early 2017.**

**What is the board looking for in an executive director?**

We want someone that literally will be the CEO of the operation. They'll have to have operational skills, they'll have to have artistic skills, they'll have to be able to manage a visual director, artistic director, performance director—all of those will report to them over time. They'll have to be good at fundraising, they'll have to be good at marketing, they'll have to be good at community relations, they'll have to be a good spokesperson. They'll pretty much have to be everything. But we've done our research and found similar positions do exist, so we know we're not shooting for the moon here. There are folks out there who have that passion and also have that ability in one package.

**When Mayor Travis approached you to work on this project, what was it that interested you? What made you say yes?**

I've always been intrigued by things I know very little about. And I can honestly say I knew very little about the arts. My expertise is in business; I've done it for 45 years. I'm not artistic personally, and I thought this would be a great time to learn something new and give something back to the community at the same time. It was really that motivation that got me involved in it to begin with.

But as I worked with the other folks on the strategic working group and now the board, folks who *are* experts in it, folks for whom this is their passion, it has rubbed off.

This would be a real bonus item for Cornelius and the Lake Norman region—one that doesn't exist anywhere in a format like the one we have in mind. And, humbly, being a part of that is exciting, and what drives me to keep working on it.

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