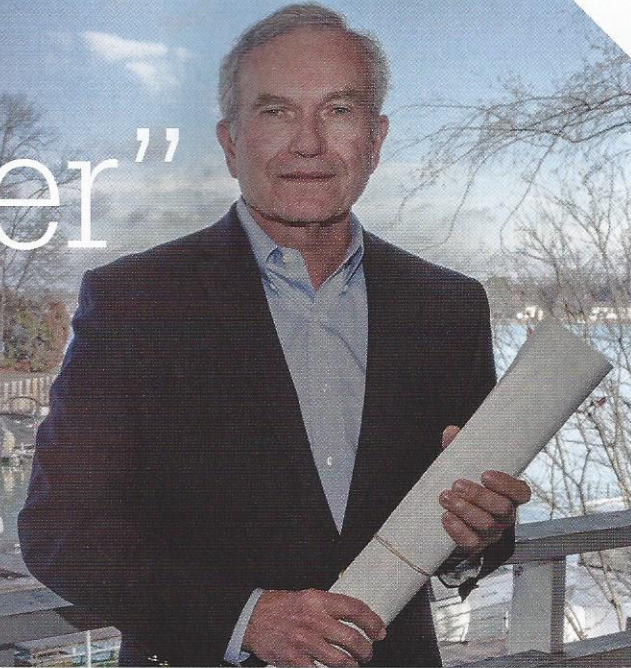


Cornelius Finds its “Nutcracker”

by Lori K. Tate
 photography by Ken Noblezada

With Greg Wessling at the helm, the Cornelius Arts and Community Center could become a regional draw



Cornelius' Greg Wessling chairs the board of directors for the Cornelius Arts and Community Center.

Greg Wessling has never sat at a pottery wheel, and he's never performed on a stage. When it comes to visual art, the Cornelius resident and businessman admits he can't even draw a straight line. However, regardless of those artistic deficiencies, Wessling is passionate about making the Cornelius Arts and Community Center a reality.

A partnership

In the fall of 2015, Cornelius Mayor Chuck Travis called Wessling, the chief operating officer of Morris International Inc. in Davidson and a personal friend of Travis', to see if he would become involved in the beginning stages of planning an arts and community center for the Lake Norman area.

"I knew very little about it," recalls Wessling of his first meeting with Travis regarding the project. Now, as the chairman of the board of directors for the Cornelius Arts and Community Center, he knows quite a lot about it. "I've gotten hooked on the project personally because I see what this can do for the town. I see what it can do for the community, and more importantly, I see what it can do for the region."

The idea for an arts and community center isn't a new one. In 2013, Cornelius constituents voted for a \$20.4 million

bond, with the money being designated for three areas: road improvements, park and recreation improvements and additions, and an arts and community center. Four million was earmarked for the center.

"We had the beginnings of a public/private partnership right there," explains Wessling. "We thought that was a great foundation." Soon the town purchased the land (approximately 1.8 acres) across from town hall for the center. "The community, the public at large, has about \$5.5 million invested in the project at this point. Our [the board's] job will be to see what we can raise in addition to that, and that will determine how big, how tall and how much."

The partnership will work as follows. The town of Cornelius will own the land and the building. Operating as a 501(c)(3) (nonprofit), the arts and community center will rent the space via a long-term lease while occupying and running the facility. Wessling says the group has applied for 501(c)(3) status and is close to receiving it.

With a board of 13 members and an advisory board of six (with ample opportunity for growth), the center is coming closer to fruition. The goal is to break dirt during the third quarter of 2018 and open the doors one year later. So far the board is on track with its timeline, as it's hired Capital Development Services in Winston-Salem to conduct a search for

an executive director for the center and to also research the philanthropic potential in the Lake Norman area.

In addition, Ginger Griffin Marketing and Design has been retained to create the branding as well as the website for the project. The next big piece is fundraising. Wessling says they could be looking at a \$10-15 million goal, but there is still more research to be done to determine the cost.

Becoming famous

Throughout the process, Wessling and other board members visited arts facilities across the state, including The Yadkinville Arts Center, Charlotte's Clayworks and Charlotte Ballet, to understand how these centers work and meet the needs of their patrons. With each respective visit, members of the board were asked, "What are you going to be famous for?"

The Yadkinville Arts Center has a national reputation for weaving. Charlotte Ballet is renowned for its annual *Nutcracker* production, and Clayworks is one of the most popular ceramics and pottery studios in the United States.

Wessling said it became clear that the center had to find its "nutcracker" before moving forward. To do that, more research was required. The group sent out a survey to 3,000 Cornelius residents, and it also looked at data from the Cornelius Arts Center, which has existed for 11 years.

"That information was incredibly helpful," says Wessling. "The [current] center is not the center that we're going to have, but nevertheless it represents the public we're going to have."

The more research the group did, the more it realized that people in this area have a strong interest in ceramics and pottery, as those classes are always full at the Cornelius Arts Center. In addition, the folks at Clayworks informed them that nearly half of their students and instructors live in the Lake Norman area.

"Clayworks has agreed in principle that they will work with us to make sure our ceramics and pottery facility will be world class," explains Wessling, "so we think it's very likely that our 'nutcracker', if you will, will be ceramics and pottery."

In the proposed structure, the ceramics studio will take up approximately 7,400 square feet, while the rest of the 43,000-square-foot building will contain classrooms, artist studios, a dance studio, a flexible theatre space for performances and events, food service facilities, and a special events room. The hope is that the center will fuel an arts district in Old

Town Cornelius, where some of the artistic offerings would not even be located in the center.

Wessling says one of the board's goals is that the center be self-sustaining in a reasonable time frame so that it is not a drain on taxpayers for a long period of time. He adds that once the building is open they should be able to build an operating plan in fairly short order.

"We want this building to be busy 24-7. ...Our research so far has told us that we're not pushing spaghetti up a staircase. There are folks are in the community that really want this, and they're pretty vocal about what they want it to be," says Wessling. "This is a bigger project than just the town of Cornelius. It's bigger than the Lake Norman area. This could be a regional draw if it's done right. ...Right now, we've got a piece of dirt and a good idea. We've got a long way to go." □

If you're interested in volunteering in the process of creating the **Cornelius Arts and Community Center**, contact Greg Wessling at gwessling@morrisinternational.com.

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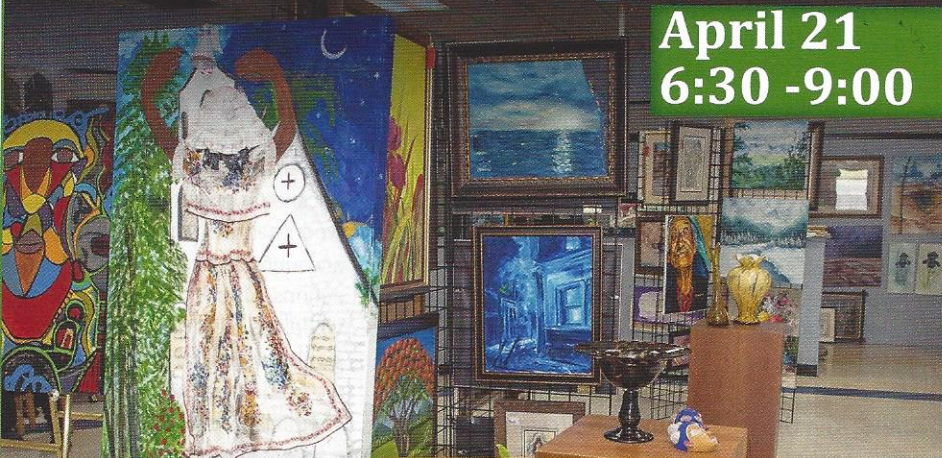
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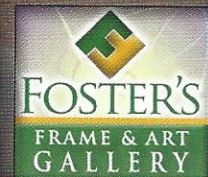


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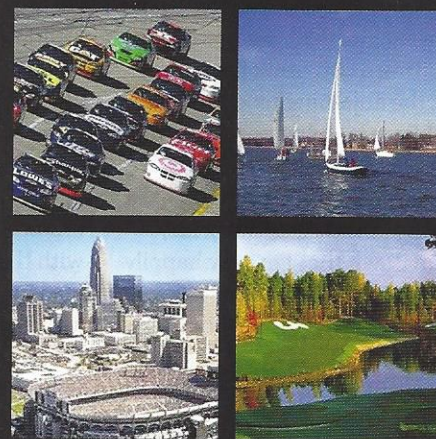
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