



Original artist conception of downtown Cornelius Arts Center

May 18. By Dave Yochum. A 60-day study on moving the proposed Cornelius Arts Center from downtown to the old Michael Waltrip Raceworld property on Liverpool is pointing to keeping the multimillion-dollar project where it was originally planned, just west of the police station, almost across from Town Hall. It would help build a solid downtown arts district, appropriate for festivals and a pedestrian-friendly streetscape.

Town officials would not comment on the record. **The cost of the arts center has never been hung on a wall with a nail, but cost estimates have risen from between \$16 million and \$20 million to as high as \$30 million. The likely pricetag is closer to the low end.**

Partial funding for the ambitious project comes from \$4 million in downtown reinvestment bonds approved by voters in 2013. The remainder is expected to come from private “naming” donors, who, so far at least, have been slow in coming. Allen Tate Realtors recently presented a check for \$6,345 to the non-profit arts center. With the downtown location all but settled, it’s likely donor announcements will be forthcoming.

Groundbreaking for the arts center was originally to occur during the third quarter of this year which starts July 1, Greg Wessling, chairman of the

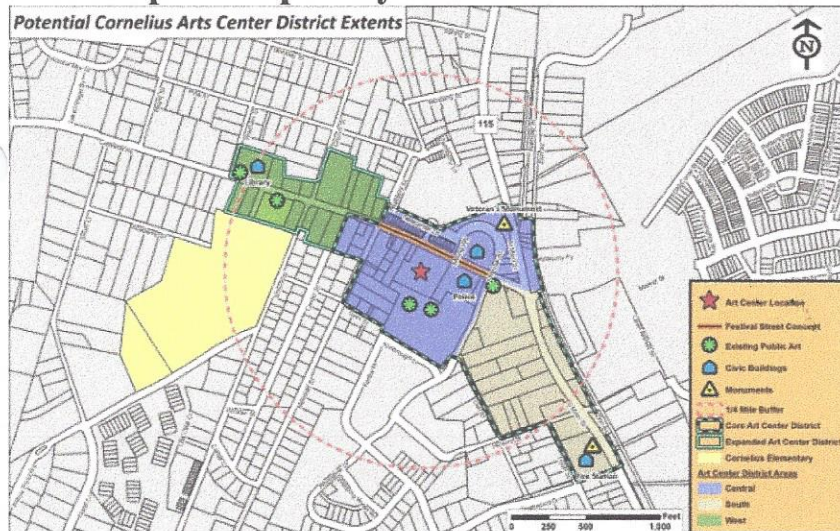
Arts Center board of directors, said at a Newsmakers Breakfast on the arts center last year.

Plans for ceramic studios—once considered “The Nutcracker” of the proposed arts center—have been tabled because of costs. Christmas performances of the holiday classic are the signature draw and chief moneymaker for the Charlotte Ballet.

Members of the Town Board told Cornelius Today they are still unclear on the costs of the arts center, in particular the town’s share.

Costs, of course, are top of mind as the 2018-2019 budgeting cycle draws to a quick conclusion.

The new budget year starts July 1 and there’s already been fierce criticism in some circles around how little—a matter of one’s perspective, of course—the town pays police, firefighters and staff, some of whom have departed for higher pay in other municipalities over the past couple of years.



One of the big issues the arts center board has struggled with is parking downtown. Commercial real estate brokers say parking in large numbers is hard to come by downtown. The site the town purchased for the arts center in January of 2017 is 1.85 acres; the [price tag was \\$1.495 million](#). A top [architectural](#) team has been hired.

The Michael Waltrip facility was seen by some members of the board as a natural alternative—it was originally built as a cineplex with multiple theaters. But it is nowhere near downtown Cornelius and does nothing to enhance the center of town which once bustled with activity during the height of the mill era. The Waltrip property, which has ample parking, is

for sale for \$8.9 million. Michael Waltrip could not be reached for comment.

Sources said former Mayor Chuck Travis met with members of the arts center board in an effort to keep the project downtown. A multimillion-dollar arts center would be a feather in any mayor's cap. Both Travis and the current mayor, Woody Washam, are supporters of the arts, including its impact on economic development.

The Cornelius arts center board, which until recently was all-white, has operated more or less privately despite the expected use of public property and some \$150,000 in funding through the municipal budget.

Voters in 2013 approved a \$20.4 million bond package that included \$4 million for town center redevelopment, which included a community arts center.

In Charlotte, the Arts & Sciences Council is a diverse, open operation with years of experience under its belt.



Mayor Woody Washam (left) and Commissioner Jim Duke (right) with Scott Higgins

One arts center board member with experience around developing an arts center, Scott Higgins, resigned recently. “I resigned because I had contributed all I could to moving the art center forward in the arts district and felt it was time to move on,” he said.

Higgins, who remains chairman of one of the town's most influential boards, Parks, Arts, Culture and Recreation, added: “I am opposed to movement of the art center to west side of town.”

The new arts center board member, an African American, is Cynthia Bush, a resident of The Peninsula.

Justin Dionne, executive director of the arts center, will hold a public Q&A at 6 pm Wednesday May 23 at the Oak Street Mill, which is directly behind the arts center site and the Police Station.

Members of the arts center board did not comment on the record.

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Discussion

One Response to "Arts Center staying downtown"

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The arts is what guides my family, friendships, vacations, philanthropy, and places we call home....so it's a critical component of our household. and we are engaged in it not just in Cornelius /Charlotte but other parts of the country as well, especially surrounding access to the arts. I love the idea of this being downtown Cornelius. Concept great. HOWEVER, I think we will outgrow it before it's built. So why not consider one be the arts center....with classes, performances, camps, parking , offices, Lease some of the space to Warehouse PAC Lease space for artists studios etc..Perhaps move a portion of the town offices and facility needs....(ie Waltrips) and the other a satellite location (ie downtown) for smaller performances, exhibits, etc. Think Spirit Square to Belk. I think we would be remiss if we didn't look at the Waltrip location and maybe a coo for timing. Great parking, great ability to hold larger scale performances, bring people to Cornelius for the destination of the arts.....it does add to economic development, and indeed the wide cultural arts community we are now building. Shout out to Bella Love for all their work in the growth of the arts in our wider community.

Posted by Robin L Lawler | [May 18, 2018, 1:33 pm](#)
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