

Renderings paint facility's aim

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CORNELIUS – Organizers of the Cornelius Arts and Community Center are sketching out plans for how to make their “pie in the sky” dreams a feasible reality.

Executive Director Justin Dionne presented concept renderings of the new center for the first time during budget talks at the Cornelius pre-meeting May 21. They include adjustable theater space, classrooms, a rooftop patio, a downtown park and other amenities. While it is not considered the final, definitive look for the project, having those, combined with a new capital plan partnership, will help the nonprofit be better prepared to hit the ground running to raise funds for the regional cultural center.

“It’s hard to raise money until you know what you are raising money for,” Dionne told the board. “You have to have something to put in front of potential donors.”

Finding the ‘Nutcracker’

Originally when a group was organized to discuss a potential new arts center in the town center, members were tasked to let their minds wander.

When Dionne as well as award-winning architect Malcolm Holzman and Charlotte’s own C-Design were brought on along with the arts center advisory board, they were able to take steps to see what was actually needed, wanted and feasible.

“We finished the pre-design process from October through the end of April,” Dionne said, adding the committee has been working very hard to ensure they left no stone unturned.

One of the group members, who is with the Charlotte Ballet, said before doing anything, they needed to find their “Nutcracker” – the thing that was going to drive revenue and participation.

Initially the aim was to have a small black box theater with classrooms and space for activities like ceramics. But research and surveys showed this wasn’t really what was wanted or needed.

“We did a massive market study

with focus groups and community input,” Dionne said referencing surveys and meetings with the public, other arts organizations and in other communities. “We were looking for data not just of what they would like but what they would be willing to pay for and how that compares to the market average.”

The top response in both categories was clear, making theater take centerstage in the plans.

“The majority, 70-80 percent, said they were interested in live theater,” he said, adding many responded they would be willing to pay \$30-40 or \$70 or more to attend.

The study also found that not only were people willing to pay for it, there was a need for it. There isn’t a large enough space to hold some of the productions groups like the Warehouse Performing Arts Center and Davidson Community Players would like to do. And the only close enough largest space, the Duke Family Performance Hall on the Davidson College campus, isn’t really available to be rented by other groups. Other current options are to rent space from high schools or go to centers in other counties.

“This wasn’t a ‘Build it, and they will come,’” Dionne said. “It was a ‘Build it already!’”

Dance had a lower interest, though people were willing to pay. However, there was a low interest in ceramics, and most people weren’t willing to continue to pay the current ceramics prices.

“We had to realize that everything couldn’t be exciting to everybody, but we didn’t have unlimited funds, and we had to make a decision,” he said, noting they were at the point in the process that they had to consider a business model.

Getting the big picture

With the lines drawn on what they needed, the board made the decision that a black box theater may not solve the problem. A larger space, currently estimated at 450 seats, could potentially drive up audience participation and revenues, plus bring in even higher caliber acts.

But Dionne and the rest of the

board has also reinforced the need to stay true to the center’s mission: “to provide exceptional visual arts, performing arts and social experiences in the Lake Norman region.”

“We want a place that has accessibility,” he said. “We don’t want a place that is for the higher income levels. Our mission is what drives us. ... It’s about bringing in a diverse population.”

While theater may be a prominent aspect of the new center, there are other driving forces.

Educational classrooms are aimed to be designed to accommodate visual arts, performing arts and youth organizations. Dance studios are planned to have amenities that will make them multi-use, flexible spaces. There likely will be galleries for visual arts, but they could also be places that could be rented out for event space.

The center’s current design also makes use of the entire facility. There is a patio planned as a public gathering space as well as a concept that would create an amphitheater with green space.

“If there is nothing going on here, people can have a picnic, bring friends and play guitar,” Dionne said. “It’s like a town green.”

He also envisions it as a place for outdoor concerts, a place to hold events like 2nd Friday or the Tawba Walk and to be an extension of downtown.

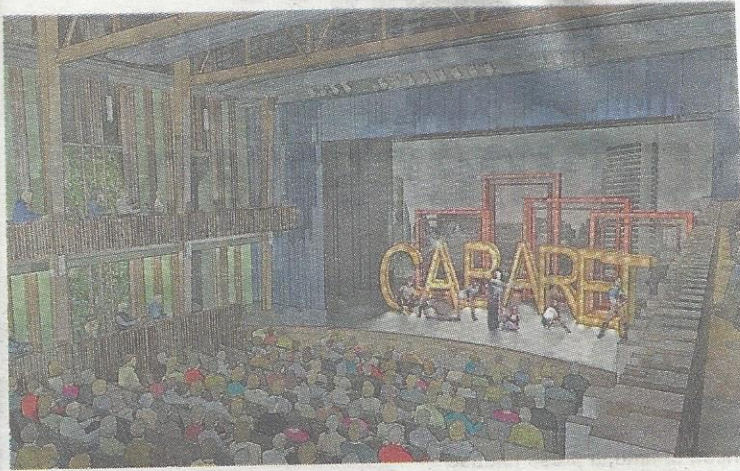
Downtown location

From Day One, parking and traffic were the largest concerns for having the center downtown.

Other locations have been considered, though there is a high likelihood it will be situated at the currently planned spot near Cornelius Town Hall, on the 1.85 acres the town recently purchased. It would be leased by the Cornelius Arts Center.

“There are 220 publically available parking spots in downtown,” Dionne said, adding that it doesn’t include privately owned spaces at Oak Street Mill, Rite-Aid or the nearby Food Lion.

The board will also look at what type of security or traffic rules would be needed and how the center or the people using it would cover those costs.



Courtesy of Cornelius Arts Center

Theater space for 450 people was in high demand during the market study.

During the May 21 budget meeting, Town Manager Anthony Roberts said staff are considering a potential parking deck in the downtown area, which Dionne said would solve many problems.

There had been talk about using the currently vacant Michael Waltrip facility to the west of Interstate 77 as the center, since the parking there is already available. Dionne said, though nothing is official and the board hasn't taken a vote on it, he believes it will move away from that idea and stick with the current plan.

"We are big believers in the contributions of a downtown arts district," Dionne said.

But keeping the location means the town will lose the oldest cotton gin in the area.

Dionne said the architects looked at the buildings as much as they could but found there was no way to save them in current form. Ideas are to repurpose the wood either as art or as part of the building, such as visible beams.

Tapping into funds

With so much still up in the air, including when the funding will come in, Dionne said timelines aren't something that are set in stone. While they have one they are working toward, "It's bad practice to say it when you haven't broken ground."

An estimated cost should be prepared by this summer.

Because of that, Dionne said the board has not actively pursued asking anyone for money – yet. That phase is about to start.

In 2013, voters agreed to approve a \$4 million bond to pay for town center improvements, with

the possibility of an art center.

During the May 21 meeting, Commissioner David Gilroy said the art center was "a major concern" for him, adding the town can't backstop it and there would need to be a limit, adding that the bond money wasn't labeled as just being for an arts center.

"At the end of the day, this has to be a private sector thing," Gilroy said, with Mayor Woody Washam quickly adding the arts board would agree.

And at the interview later, Dionne couldn't stress that enough.

"\$4 million is all we are expecting," Dionne said, adding that the arts center is a nonprofit and is not part of the town. "We will raise the rest through fundraising – lots of fundraising."

That includes philanthropic donations, pledges, investors from private and corporate entities, foundations and grants.

Deloitte, an accountancy firm, has recently announced it will work with the nonprofit on a seven-year operational and capital plan, free of charge. The Deloitte team will analyze fundraising and financial models.

The five-person Deloitte team assisting Cornelius Arts Center is led by: Cornelius resident David Rizzo, principal, Deloitte Consulting LLP and Huntersville resident Zack Toof, manager, Deloitte Consulting LLP.

Cost estimates and what the board is willing to spend for the project will dictate the final overall design. Maybe they have fewer classrooms or a smaller theater, Dionne said.

"We'll be successful either way," he said. □