

Economic driver: Cornelius hires arts center director

By Newsroom · June 7, 2017 · [Post a comment](#)



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June 7. By Dave Yochum. After a nationwide search, the nascent Cornelius Arts and Community Center has a new executive director, and they found him close to home. Justin Dionne, who was a consultant to the Cornelius Arts Center last year, was the managing artistic director of the highly successful Lee Street Theater in Salisbury.

He left Salisbury last year to pursue a master's degree at Florida State University, but was wooed back to North Carolina by the team at the citizen-driven Arts Center, a 501(c)3 that will build and run a multimillion-dollar arts center just to the east of the Police Station downtown.

Dionne could not be reached for comment, but he is already working out of a temporary cubicle at Cornelius Town Hall.

Denis Bilodeau, an arts center board member and chair of the marketing committee, said: "Justin is a very talented, high-energy young man. His skills and broad experience at Lee Street Theater will translate well to our exciting project."

Dionne will help with the fundraising process, and ultimately lead the multimillion-dollar arts center independently from the town. The town has paid \$1.495 million for the property; the facility, when completed, is expected to be a significant economic driver for downtown and for Cornelius. Across the country, arts districts have helped attract new business and well-heeled crowds.

Greg Wessling, the chairman of the board of directors for the Cornelius Arts and Community Center, said the arts center, along with a proposed downtown arts district—picture cafes, shops and galleries—is "the most exciting project Cornelius has ever had the chance to be a part of."

Cornelius voters helped paint the picture: In 2013 they approved a \$20.4 million bond package of which \$4 million was earmarked for town center redevelopment including the arts center.

In the past six months, the town has paid \$1.5 million for the old Farmers Co. warehouse property, which includes an original, century-old cotton gin which is expected to be preserved and incorporated in the new arts center.

Architects are already lining up to design the center, which will be the cultural centerpiece of North Mecklenburg.

Groundbreaking is expected to begin around the third quarter of next year with the grand opening about a year later.

The arts center will be a "public-private endeavor" with the town of Cornelius serving as the landlord, Wessling said.