

Cornelius buying land for old town arts center

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Julia Telford King will open a new stand-alone real estate office in downtown Cornelius this fall. It could be the beginning of a resurgence in the historic downtown which once bustled with mill workers and farmhands.

She has purchased a live-work unit where retail space is on the ground floor and owners live on the two floors above. Retail has not been buzzing here, with at least half the units in service businesses.

“This facility will bring an element of entertainment and culture that will enhance our quality of life for decades to come,”

– Woody Washam, Cornelius Mayor Pro Tem

But now, with the Town of Cornelius planning a \$4 million cultural arts center downtown, it could bustle again soon. The town will pay \$1.495 million for the old Farmers Co. warehouses and cotton gin property currently owned by Hall Johnston Heirs LLC. The property was assessed at \$1.1 million during the 2011 revaluation, according to Mecklenburg County tax records.

Old-timers still refer to this suburban lake town as a mill town. Old-old-timers are quick to point out that Cornelius was first and foremost a farm village. A virtually intact land-grant plantation sits less than a mile from the arts center site.

Mayor Pro Tem Woody Washam said the planning and construction of an Arts and Performance Center in Old Town Cornelius will provide a “monumental economic uplift” to downtown Cornelius.

“This facility will bring an element of entertainment and culture that will enhance our quality of life for decades to come,” Washam said.

Cornelius commercial real estate broker Tom McMahon says the town investing in its own downtown is a good thing. “Municipalities have to invest in their own growth and react to whats happeing in their own community. One

may question where they invest their dollars, should the dollars be invested in infrastructure needs, but this will be a good community investment," he said.

While there are no quick fixes for declining downtowns, public officials need to be on board as well as existing merchants.

"I like that its growing...the whole location seems to be up and coming,"

– Julia Telford King, NextHome Choice Realty

Lenore Cuyler, owner of The Style Merchant downtown, said the town needs to focus on adequate parking for a cultural arts center as well as pedestrian safety. The nearby intersection at Main Street and Catawba Avenue is a daunting experience for people walking from Antiquity, a transit-oriented mixed-use development just east of downtown. Sales of residential properties are booming; retail stores are just now opening after a new Harris Teeter was completed late last year.

Cornelius Town Commissioner Jim Duke expects the arts center land deal to close in January. Meanwhile, the town is behind efforts to organize a 501(c)3 for fundraising purposes as well as naming a board of directors for the new cultural arts center.

An Arts Task Group is handing off "great ideas and implementation" to the new Arts Board which is under consideration, Washam said.

Duke said he hopes the cotton gin building can be somehow restored and incorporated in the arts center project. It is said to be the only remaining cotton gin in Mecklenburg County. Duke said there is also a scale for weighing cotton that could be part of a long hoped for permanent history museum. The distinctive blue warehouses will be removed or torn down.

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

King says NextHome Choice Realty, a franchise real estate agency, will open this fall with a couple of agents.

"I like that its growing...the whole location seems to be up and coming," she says.

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