

The Future of Our Downtown

By Clayton Murtle, Communications Manager, Town of Cornelius

In 1959, Governor Luther Hodges visited the area to blast the first dynamite for the dam that would create Lake Norman. Bishop Nolan Harmon said in a prayer over the blasting event, "May the land lost prove prosperity gained." The last couple of decades have indeed seen an explosion of growth on the west side of Catawba. Retail, residential and entertainment buildings have sprung up wherever they can find a tract. This prosperity was and is a boon that ultimately established Cornelius as a town on the water. Before Lake Norman, however, it was the NC-115 corridor that was the lifeblood of Cornelius, Huntersville and Davidson alike. The beauty and property values on the lake shifted the center of gravity in the town for nearly 50 years, but local investment is turning the tides and bringing the focal point back to the heart of old town Cornelius.

The Cain Center for the Arts, which is currently in the early stages of development, has become a new center of gravity for the resurgence of old town. The prospect of such an exciting cultural amenity has lit a fire that has the potential to dramatically reshape our downtown. Developers and property owners in the area have taken a new look and see opportunity staring back. The arts center will be a 25-million-dollar development project that will sit next to the police station. The exact design is still in the works, but the vision for the space is largely settled. A large indoor theater will host a variety of performances from both local and out-of-town talent. A gallery will showcase the arts and provide a space for special events. The arts center will also have an educational aspect to it. Citizens without much experience will be able to try their hand at a variety of arts classes. Those who already have skills can further hone them with the aid of professionals and new resources.

Perhaps even more exciting than the Cain Center for the Arts is the Arts District that will surround it. The boundaries are not set in stone yet, but the core of it will be in the downtown area. There will be an outdoor amphitheater where one can catch live music, socialize with neighbors and snack on meals from local food trucks. Pair these awesome amenities with programming tailored to our area and it becomes clear that old town Cornelius has an exciting future ahead.

A project as large as this ends up pulling in a whole community of people to help it succeed. Restaurants, breweries and commercial developers are already testing the waters around the area to see where they may best fit. Location is key for these things and business owners

want to be sure their locations are as accessible as possible. The Cornelius PARC department has spent the last decade making that easier for businesses and citizens. The department is achieving this through an extensive network of greenways called the "Emerald Necklace." This will be an interconnected greenway loop around Cornelius that will connect parks, shops, schools and other points of interest to the places where people live. Nearly eight miles of the 13-mile trail system are already complete, and close to 80% will be complete by 2020. These trails are already a great resource for Cornelius residents to take a stroll to their favorite spots in town, and they will be a key aspect of the thriving downtown ecosystem as they get built out even further.

The future of this area is being decided now, and 2019 will likely be a tipping point in the effort to return old town to its former prominence. Between the Cain Center for the Arts, the Arts District, the Emerald Necklace greenway system and all the associated development, old town Cornelius is shaping up to be a community hub of entertainment and commerce. This development is a huge opportunity for the town and the impacts are only just starting to play out.



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