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Arts center could bring boost to Blacksburg

The \$89 million building on the Virginia Tech campus will feature a 1,260-seat performance hall.

By [Sharla Bardin](#)

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BLACKSBURG -- Virginia Tech officials expect to break ground in June for a center they say will increase the presence and practice of the arts on campus and in the community.

It could also bring about an economic boost to Blacksburg through the people who attend performances at the center and then shop, eat or stay in hotels afterward.

Tech officials plan to formally unveil the final design renderings today for the exterior of the new Center for the Arts during a 10 a.m. news conference with project representatives.

The \$89 million building is expected to open in 2013.

"We're very happy to be at this point where we can share the plans and look forward to sharing more," said Ruth Waalkes, executive director of the Center for the Arts. "This is certainly something that will serve Virginia Tech, the town of Blacksburg and the region."

The 156,000-square-foot center will be made up of new and renovated facilities, including Shultz Hall, at the intersection of North Main Street and Alumni Mall. It will feature a 1,260-seat performance hall, visual arts galleries, and teaching and research spaces, including the Center for Creative Technologies in the Arts.

Officials say the performance hall will have the flexibility to present theater, music and dance performances, while the visual arts galleries will feature space for the university's art collection and touring exhibitions.

Funding for the project is coming from a mixture of public and private monies. Of the total, \$33.2 million is from the university, \$27.8 million will come from the state and \$28 million from private donations, said Minnis Ridenour, chairman of the building committee who is helping to secure private donations.

To date, officials have raised \$8.4 million in private donations for the center. Of that amount, \$7 million is for construction, Ridenour said.

He said "several major gift proposals" are under consideration now and said he is confident about reaching the \$28 million goal.

"We feel good about the level of support that we have received and the level of interest," said Ridenour, who served as Tech's chief operating officer and executive vice president before retiring in 2004.

Officials said the center is part of a comprehensive arts initiative at Tech. Its goals include increasing the presence of the arts on campus and in the region, and strengthening Tech's arts and cultural programs.

Another goal is to build on the region's cultural offerings.

Waalkes said center project representatives have met with officials at Roanoke's Taubman Museum of Art, the Roanoke Symphony Orchestra, Jefferson Center and representatives from the Abingdon and Marion theater communities about ways the Center for the Arts and those programs could work together in the future.

The idea is to "find ways to collaborate so that we can strengthen one another's programs" not compete with one another, Waalkes said.

The arts center could also be an economic engine, such as by attracting new galleries that may want to locate nearby, and create a sales tax boost that could come from people who will eat and shop in Blacksburg before and after performances.

Blacksburg Mayor Ron Rordam said he sees the Center for the Arts as the "major art anchor" for downtown Blacksburg.

"It just adds to that quality of life, too," he said. "It's an exciting project."

It's also a project that coordinates with the town's North Main Street improvement project that town officials say is meant to increase pedestrian safety and draw more people downtown.

The two-year construction project is set to start in mid-June and could be finished in less than two years if winter weather doesn't hinder the work, officials have said.

The work involves a half-mile stretch of North Main Street from College Avenue to Kabrich Street and will reduce the existing roadway from two lanes in each direction to one lane with a shared center lane for left turns.

Also, work will involve replacing the current intersection at North Main Street and Prices Fork Road with a roundabout and adding signals that pedestrians can push to allow them to cross.

Rordam said the goal is to have the town project completed by the time the center opens.

Virginia Tech is not the only area university to undertake a major arts building project.

Radford University's \$22.5 million Douglas and Beatrice Covington Center for Visual and Performing Arts opened in November 2008.

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