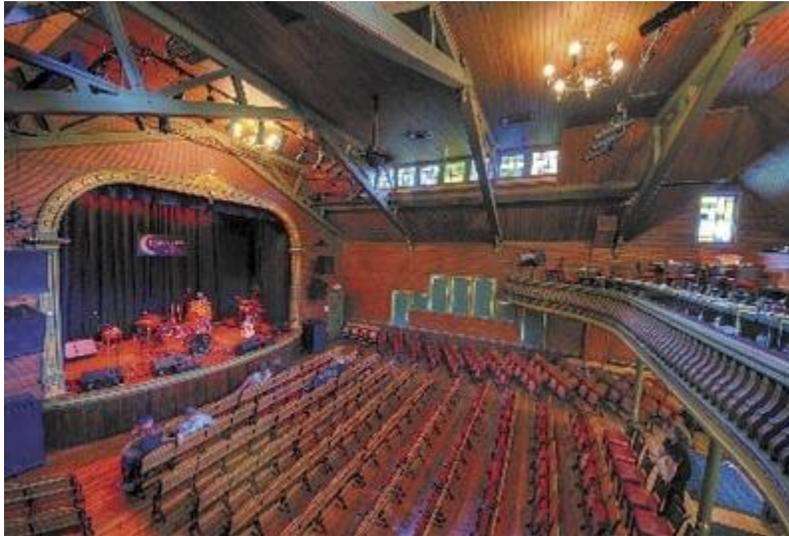


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Hincks never lost sight of Hartford's potential



Contributed Photo. Norfolk's Infinity Hall, pictured above, will be opening a second location in Hartford's Front Street District in 2013.

By Greg Bordonaro

When Dan Hincks considered opening a music hall and bistro venue in Connecticut about six years ago, his initial thought was to do it in Hartford.

Hincks thought leveraging the city's dynamic arts scene would create a vibrant environment for an intimate music house. He targeted several downtown locations including the fledgling Front Street Entertainment District, but eventually settled on a small Victorian opera house in the nondescript Litchfield County town of Norfolk instead.

The Infinity Hall music venue in the northwest corner of the state has gained national recognition since opening in 2008, attracting top entertainment acts ranging from Kenny Rankin, Marcia

Ball to LeAnn Rimes and Phoebe Snow.

But even with that success in recent years, Hincks said he never took his eye off Hartford.

"The whole time we were building and operating Infinity Hall in Norfolk, we were looking at the Hartford market," Hincks said. "It's a great arts location that needed to have a high quality, intimate space for popular music."

Hincks' bullish outlook for Hartford was the driving force behind the recent deal to finally open a music venue downtown.

With the state bond commission's approval last week of \$1.3 million for the project, Infinity Hall has all the

financing it needs to open in Hartford, where a 500-seat venue and 100-seat restaurant are expected to open in Front Street by the end of 2013.

Infinity Hall Hartford will be a \$5.2 million project funded through a consortium that includes state taxpayers, private investors and contributions from Front Street developer HB Nitkin Group, Hincks said.

Negotiations to open the venue, which were first reported by the Hartford Business Journal in January, have been ongoing for more than a year, and Hincks said he has been working to come up with financing for months.

In January, Hincks filed papers with the Securities and

Exchange Commission outlining plans to raise \$3.5 million for the Hartford venue. Hincks wouldn't disclose how much money he was able to raise from private investors.

Peter Christian, a developer for HB Nitkin Group, said his firm is contributing \$2.9 million for Infinity Hall to build out its Hartford space, which is more than half of the project's total funding.

In 2011, HB Nitkin Group received \$5 million from Bristol sports giant ESPN to help attract tenants to Front Street. Christian said those funds have gone into a larger pool dedicated to helping Front Street tenants build out their facilities.

ESPN provided that contribution after failing to open its own Front Street venue, which was part of the original plan when the mixed use development was first conceived more than a decade ago.

Hincks said the Hartford venue will share some of the same qualities of Infinity Hall in Norfolk, but also will have its own unique charm.

The biggest difference is that Infinity Hall Hartford will be built in 13,000 square feet of newly constructed commercial space, compared to the centuries old music house in Norfolk. Hincks said the Hartford location will share a similar burgundy, green and gold color scheme as well as wood interior, which helps support strong acoustics.

The 100-seat Bistro will be located apart from the theater and offer a "creative American fare," menu, Hincks said.

The music hall will have 400 seats on the orchestra level, and an additional 100 seats in the mezzanine, where patrons can access full service dining and drinks.

The orchestra level won't have dining, but will include a full bar in the back, just off the floor so people can grab drinks without interrupting the performance, Hincks said.

But as Hincks makes his bet on downtown Hartford, it will be people in the suburbs that hold the ultimate trump card. For Infinity Hall Hartford to be successful, Hincks says it must gain a loyal following from people living beyond downtown.

That means suburbanites will have to visit Hartford at night and on weekends, an audience the city has struggled to attract for some time.

Hincks said cheap parking and an ideal location right off interstates 91 and 84 will make Infinity Hall Hartford an attractive destination spot.

Christian said convention goers should also find it as an attractive entertainment option.

"We see this as something that is going to bring a lot of people to downtown," Christian said.

The recent momentum Front Street has gained should also help. A new movie theater

called Spotlight Theaters is under construction and is expected to open in November. The four-screen theater will show independent, art and mainstream films.

Meanwhile, sources say Capital Grille is close to signing a lease to open a steak house restaurant at Front Street. Collectively, the three tenants would fill a majority of the 66,000-square-foot development.

Christian said getting the first tenant signed was critical because until that happens businesses are skittish about opening in a new development, particularly in downtown Hartford.

Meanwhile, Christian said he expects to have in the next few weeks multiple offers from lenders interested in financing the first phase of the residential component of Front Street, which will include 115 apartment units.

The apartment build out is seen as a key component in making Front Street a much more vibrant mixed use development. Christian said the apartments would be about a \$36 million project. Already, \$12 million has been set aside by the state to help fund it.

Hincks hopes all the recent Front Street momentum pays dividends for Infinity Hall Hartford long-term.

"I think Hartford is on the cusp of a major renaissance," Hincks said.