

## Durham's Venable Center to get Somerhill Gallery

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DURHAM -- The Durham art scene is getting a star at its center.

Somerhill Gallery, one of the most well-known galleries in the Triangle and a mainstay at Chapel Hill's Eastgate Shopping Center, is moving to Venable Center in downtown Durham.

Starting in May, Somerhill will occupy 9,663 square feet in The Receiving Room, a long warehouse where owner Joe Rowand is planning to install 40 skylights, put in new white oak floors, build a courtyard with a water feature and expand gallery space for photography and capacity for private collections.

In an interview Monday, Rowand proudly showed off a model of the new space designed by Philip Szostak, who also designed Rowand's private home and the current Somerhill space at Eastgate.

He expressed excitement about Venable, which, located at 305 S. Roxboro St., serves as a visual gateway into downtown.

"You come around on the Durham Freeway, see the top of the building and bang, there's the gallery," Rowand said. "Anyone who wants to go to the Performing Arts Center will have to drive by us."

Rowand signed a lease on Friday but declined to say how much he will spend renting and outfitting the space.

But after a month of frantically trying to secure the future home of his 36-year-old gallery, Rowand was satisfied.

For the past 18 years, Somerhill has resided at Eastgate, where it has survived two floods and years of legal wrangling with an insurance company over resultant damages. Meanwhile, Rowand built a



Submitted

Phil Szostak (left) and Joe Rowand, owner of Somerhill Gallery, look at a plan for the gallery's new home at downtown Durham's Venable Center. Szostak designed the new space.

profitable business with a loyal clientele and high name recognition, drawing customers from across North Carolina and farther.

"We're a national gallery," Rowand said matter-of-factly Monday.

But in February, the gallery was unceremoniously booted from Eastgate by Maryland-based real estate manager Federal Realty, which terminated the lease and gave Rowand 45 days to move out.

Eastgate is shedding old tenants and taking on national retailers like Trader Joe's and Starbucks as new tenants to completely revamp its image.

Rowand at first focused his search in Chapel Hill but branched out into Durham and Mebane.

What led to him to Venable was first an e-mail from Andy Rothschild of Scientific Properties, owner of the property, saying he "might be able to help."

Rowand preferred to stay in Chapel Hill, but as he exhausted options there, Szostak nudged him in the direction of Durham, where he had recently designed the Durham Performing Arts Center.

Rowand took note of Venable's ample parking, 14-foot ceilings and the possibilities of design in the old tobacco warehouse.

At Venable, Somerhill will have 16-17 earmarked parking spaces and more available spaces around the property. The new space is also about 1,000 square feet bigger than Somerhill's current location, allowing for an expansion of the grand concourse from 10 to 14 feet and lengthening the photography gallery from 16 to 26 feet.

That kind of space was hard to find in Chapel Hill, Rowand said. He had been working with the town's economic development officer, Dwight Bassett, to find a new home.

They looked at three vacancies, but none could satisfy the criteria of plentiful parking and high ceilings, while allowing the gallery control of its look.

When reached on Monday, Bassett expressed disappointment with Somerhill's move, saying, "I hate that we're losing this Chapel Hill business. There was just not a lot of spaces in Chapel Hill that met what he was looking for."

Art lovers and loyal clients will be glad to hear that some components of Somerhill's look will be kept the same, such as its signature blue ceiling. But it seems Somerhill is getting a second life.

Its logo will be redesigned and a fireplace will be installed so clients can see the art as it might be displayed in their homes.

And after a whirlwind tour of 18 galleries in New York, Rowand and Szostak are putting in a courtyard with a water feature, palm trees and an "oasis of light" to show off the sculpture collection.

Upon hearing of Somerhill's move Monday, Durham Arts Council Director of Artist Services Margaret DeMott said, "It is really exciting that when they move, they choose to move to Durham. That's like 'Hur-rah.'"

"Because the gallery is so visible, it already has a strong client base, and their clientele is going to follow them," DeMott said. "Their clientele might have thought for the last few years, if I want art, I need to go to Chapel Hill. Now, they'll come to Durham."

DeMott said the gallery's reputation for quality -- and Rowand's business sense -- will be a positive in the downtown art scene.

"If the tide rises, the ships rise with it," she said.

Somerhill will open in May.