

Startup incubator eyed for Norwalk

Founders of Stamford Innovation Center look locally

By Robert Koch

NORWALK — The founders of Stamford Innovation Center are looking to spur new startup companies in Norwalk through the creation of a local business incubator.

"We've been engaging with the anchor institutions in Norwalk and meeting with

a lot of great and excited citizens of Norwalk and trying to develop a plan that's going to capture the strength of the town and make it more attractive and exciting for the growth of startups, technology and other new companies to create new jobs," said Peter Propp, chief marketing officer at Stamford Innovation Center.

Propp and Barry Schwimmer, presi-

dent of Northeast Community Innovation Corp, a nonprofit organization that helps startups, are seeking the city's blessing to apply for an implementation grant to create an innovation center in Norwalk. So far, they have secured a \$50,000 planning grant through CTNext, a state-launched program that encourages entrepreneurship. The Norwalk Redevelopment Agency has kicked in \$25,000 toward the planning effort.

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Peter Propp, chief marketing officer at Stamford Innovation Center

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NCIC and the Redevelopment Agency would partner with Norwalk Public Library, Norwalk Community College, Wall Street Theater Co., Connecticut Public Television and local entrepreneurs. The theater is expected to open at 71 Wall St. in April. CPTV has submitted plans for use of the space next door.

A vision statement submitted to the city by NCIC identifies the proposed incubator as "SoNo Innovation Place," but also references the Wall Street area: "While we envision SoNo as Norwalk's primary urban business district, we also hope to link its economic revival to a parallel revitalization effort, focused on the arts, in the Wall Street area."

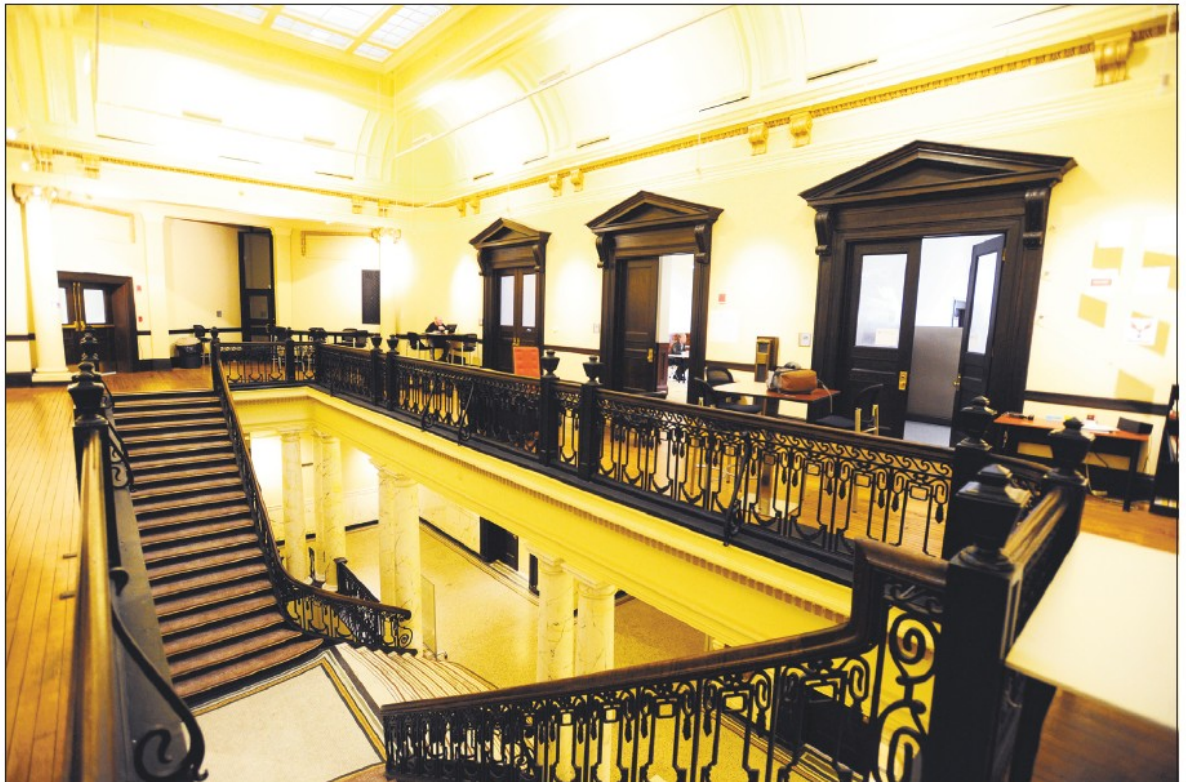
Propp said NCIC has not found a physical location and is focused first on the programming aspects of the innovation center.

"The physical location can be really helpful, but there's so many terrific assets in the area," Propp said. "Assuming we win the implementation grant, we'll be doing the programming wherever we can and over time we'll develop a more detailed approach."

Propp said the innovation center would provide opportunities for technology and non-technology startups, digital marketing companies and food and beverage entrepreneurs. He cited Pepperidge Farm, SoBe, SpikedSeltzer and Bear Naked Granola as examples of Norwalk's leadership in the latter.

"With all these terrific, high-end, food-oriented sort of companies, combine that with the aquaculture and oysters, there's something there," Propp said. "We're exploring that."

Chris Bradley, Norwalk Public Library system director, said the Main Library on Belden Avenue has a small "Maker Space" and is trying to free up a lower-level space that could be used by the innovation center. She described the neighbor-



Michael Cummo / Hearst Connecticut Media

The Stamford Innovation Center, above and below, located at 175 Atlantic St., consists of various rooms and workspaces.

hood as ideal for startup companies.

"It's ready to pop as an innovation center," Bradley said. "The rents would make things available for startups, and we've got the theater there. The library is looking to expand and some new restaurants are looking to come in."

To move forward with the innovation center, NCIC needs the city's support. On Thursday evening, the Norwalk Common Council's Planning Committee lent its support to Propp and Schwimmer applying for an implementation grant to create the center. The full council will take up the matter next Tuesday.

April 1 is the deadline to apply for an application grant. Twelve organizations were awarded planning grants. Propp predicts competition for the implementation grants will

be fierce but he added, "we think Norwalk stacks up well."

If an implementation grant is awarded, the innovation center would begin work in July with speakers, workshops and other events at various locations in Norwalk, according to Propp.

The effort comes as Stamford Innovation Center faces possible eviction over unpaid rent from its space at Old Town Hall at 175 Atlantic St. Officials are working to resolve the matter.

Tim Curtin, chairman of the Old Town Hall Redevelopment Agency, said last October he was working on a formal notice giving the organization until Dec. 31 to leave the historic building.

Schwimmer, managing partner of the Stamford Innovation Center, said NCIC considers itself a driver of innovation in the



Northeast and wants to operate "from Westchester County to just south of Boston." He said NCIC will remain in Stamford "in one form or another" as it looks to begin opera-

tions in Norwalk.

"As of right now, operations in Norwalk will not affect operations in Stamford," Schwimmer said. "How NCIC evolves over time will depend on the

available opportunities and resources to work in a new community."

Nora Naughton and Nelson Oliveira contributed to this report.