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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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**Merrill Community Arts Center Comes to Life**

Arts Connection is happy to announce the first phase toward creating the Merrill Community Arts Center - the opening of their Rivertown Campus. This 8,000 s.f. facility at 380 Rivertown Drive in Woodbury will include space for theater set design building, costume and props production and storage, visual art design and display, administrative offices and meeting rooms, and space for rehearsals and gatherings to support the craft of arts in our community.

Arts Connection will continue to complete designs for the construction of a Black Box Theater to be attached to the Loft Stage at East Ridge High School, scheduled for construction starting in the spring of 2012. The East Ridge Campus will serve primarily as a rehearsal and “green room” facility for community arts groups as well as East Ridge High School, thereby maximizing the Loft Stage as a premiere performance facility. It will also provide a venue for smaller performance opportunities for theater, music, dance, literary and visual arts.

The decision to separate the “back end” arts functions from the performance facility was made after construction bids revealed special challenges and costs associated with building on to the existing Loft Stage venue. In order to move forward, a new solution was required to meet the budget, function and timeline needs of the project. This solution has resulted in the purchase of an existing off-campus facility to house those functions not used by the school district, to be combined with an on-campus Black Box theater. Together, these facilities will meet the full needs of the art center within the budget.

Arts Connection will continue to raise funds to strengthen the endowment available to support the ongoing operations of the Rivertown Campus. The East Ridge Campus operations will be supported through fees secured by event ticket sales and through outside rentals of the Black Box Theater. The long term use agreement already approved by Arts Connection and South Washington County School District #833 will be modified as needed to govern the mutual use of the Loft Stage and Black Box Theater facilities.

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**History:**

In 2005, Mayor Bill Hargis brought together leaders from Arts Connection and School District #833 to discuss the development of a community arts center, as part of the districts’ desire to construct a third high school. This partnership was formed and in 2006, Arts Connection’s members provided leadership and support for the school’s bond referendum, and served on both the Architect Selection Committee and the Design Committee. The Loft Stage was opened in 2009 as a high school and community performance facility. Arts Connection proceeded with its fundraising efforts for the Center, and secured a major gift of over \$2 million from 40-year Woodbury Resident Dorothy K. Merrill. A design and long term use agreement for the Merrill Community Arts Center was approved by the school board and City of Woodbury in 2011.