

Editorial: Kalkhof bows out on high note

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In the 20 years since Bill Kalkhof took the helm of Downtown Durham Inc., the city center has evolved from a crumbling ruin into a desirable place to live and do business.

Just days before his retirement party, Preservation Durham hosted a walking tour of some of the homes nestled away downtown above storefronts along Parrish, Main and East Chapel Hill streets.

From the rooftop patio of the Snow Building penthouse apartment, visitors could take in the skyline on either side of the railroad tracks and see the mark left by Kalkhof during his tenure: the American Tobacco Campus, Durham Bulls Athletic Park, the Durham Performing Arts Center and the revamped streetscape in the city center.

Despite a struggling national economy, our downtown has continued its rebirth. Much of that can be attributed to Kalkhof's efforts on behalf of DDI, but it also shows signs of continuing without him, as the Suntrust tower seems destined to become a new hotel and plans are in the works for a residential skyscraper looming above the bull statue and Blue Coffee Cafe.

In December, when Kalkhof announced his retirement, he noted: "We are no longer called the ugly stepchild of the Triangle."

That's been attributed to his work as a "relentless visionary," as some call him. "Twenty years ago, who wanted to live downtown?" asked City Councilman Steve Schewel. "Nobody. Only the bravest pioneers."

On Monday, as The Herald-Sun's Laura Oleniacz reported, Kalkhof said during a retirement party at Tyler's Tap Room: "I'm proud of what the collective 'we' have accomplished."

Schewel expects to see the momentum started by Kalkhof continue to build toward a critical mass.

"It's really been his kind of relentless optimism, combined with his ability to put people together that's made it all go," Schewel said.

On Tuesday, Kalkhof officially retired.

He has established a worthy legacy in collaboration with city leaders. His successor will have their work cut out for them as they try to follow in his footsteps. At this point, DDI's search committee has narrowed their list down to four potential candidates. Don't expect an announcement until after the board holds a meeting in May.

What's next for Kalkhof?

For now, he wants to catch his breath.

He certainly deserves a vacation. But we doubt we've seen the last of him. He has talked in the past of running for a seat on the City Council, but that's not certain yet.

Guess we'll see what develops.