

No way but up with convention center

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DURHAM —

Before the Durham Bulls Athletic Park or the Durham Performing Arts Center were built, before the renovation of the Carolina Theatre, the city and county in the late 1980s built the Durham Convention Center to help jump-start downtown redevelopment and attract business.

Durham has not always had good luck finding the right manager for the center, but city and county officials this week heard some long-awaited news: The convention center's fortunes are beginning to reflect the growth of downtown. At a work session Monday, Drew Cummings, assistant county manager, told the County Commissioners that Global Spectrum, the Philadelphia-based management company, has slashed previous operating deficits. The last deficit, for fiscal 2013-14, was \$167,078, below the \$350,000 deficit the convention center's board had predicted.

Shaner Hotels, the previous manager, left a \$1.4 million deficit during its last year managing the convention center (Shaner still manages the downtown Marriott, which sits above the center).

City and county officials like the way Spectrum is managing the convention center and are poised to extend the company's contract through the summer of 2019. If past is prologue, it's the right move.

Shaner put the convention center "on autopilot," Cummings said, but since Global Spectrum took over in 2011, the company has increased its marketing of the convention center, which also underwent renovations that same year. N.C. Comicon -- the annual convention of comic book artists, game designers and Cosplayers -- was so impressed that it has made the center its home for the past three gatherings, producing a windfall for downtown and other local businesses.

Durham can reasonably expect more such events. With the planned opening of the 21c Museum Hotel, the construction of a new hotel next to DPAC, the opening next year of a new hotel in the former Mutual Community Savings Bank on Chapel Hill Street, and other developments, Durham will have the room space to accommodate more conventions and events well into the future. The Durham Convention and Visitors Bureau has begun reaching out to the new hotels to find more ways of marketing Durham to potential visitors. Previously, under the Shaner management, the Convention and Visitors Bureau felt awkward promoting the Shaner-run Marriott, Cummings said, but the new management agreement has given the organization a freer hand in marketing.

Some 25 years ago, when Durham built the convention center, elected officials could only imagine the success that downtown is experiencing, or the changes that have happened in the last decade. Now that Durham has found the right partners to manage the Durham Convention Center, there's no way to go but up.

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