

[\[back\]](#)



## Business leaders laud Durham

By JEFF ZIMMER, The Herald-Sun  
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DURHAM -- The message from two CEOs and dozens of charts measuring various aspects of Durham's economy was the same: Durham is the place to be.

That was the message served with breakfast during the ninth annual State of Durham's Economy event, which drew about 500 to the Durham Civic Center on Tuesday morning. City officials with the Office of Economic and Workforce Development have used the event as a review of Durham's economy during the past year and this year two chief executives of Durham firms helped highlight the Bull City's booming business community.

Ryan Wuerch, Motricity's chief executive, spoke of how his then-small company moved from Nashville to Durham less than three years ago. The firm, which provides mobile content such as ring tones for cell phones, has since attracted \$150 million in venture capital, grown to about 300 workers and moved into new headquarters in American Tobacco.

"We are so excited that we made that decision that day to call this home," Wuerch said.

Dennis Gillings, the chief executive of Quintiles Transnational, told how he launched the contract research organization in 1982 with 10 employees. The firm, which recently announced plans to add 1,000 workers to its Durham headquarters, has since grown to 16,000 employees in 50 countries. "It has been an exciting ride, and it's been an exciting ride for Durham," Gillings said.

During the meeting, officials made it clear it has been an exciting year for economic development. Durham produced 18 economic development announcements that will generate 2,852 new jobs and \$315 million in new capital investment, according to Ellen Reckhow, chairwoman of the County Commission. "You can be very proud of these statistics," she said. "2006 has been a banner year for economic development in Durham County."

But there was more to the year than new firms coming to Durham. Several projects finally reached an action point, such as the approval of the \$44 million Durham Performing Arts Center and the start of the \$150 million West Village expansion project, said Alan DeLisle, the assistant city manager who oversees the Office of Economic and Workforce Development.

The arts center project, in particular, had a difficult time as it made its way through city hall and the Durham City Council. "It's the easiest project we've ever done," DeLisle said to laughter. "Just checking to see if you were asleep."

Some of the economic highlights of the year were:

-- Values of residential building permits jumped to \$531 million in fiscal year 2006, up from \$425 million in 2005. It was the first time Durham has broken \$500 million in residential permit values.

-- Values of commercial building permits dropped to \$302 million in the same period, from the record \$897 million in permits issued in fiscal 2005, according to data from the Durham city-County Inspections Department. DeLisle noted commercial construction values fluctuate annually as big projects come and go. "We'll keep an eye on that," he said.

-- Durham collected \$165 million in gross retail sales tax in fiscal year 2006, the sixth straight year of growth in tax revenues from retail sales.

-- Downtown Durham's tax base grew to \$269 million in 2005, up from \$231 million in 2000. Meanwhile, the number of employees in downtown hit 14,000 in 2006, up from 10,704 in 2000.

-- The number of visitors to Durham hit 5.26 million in calendar 2005, up 1.2 percent. Taxable visitor spending rose to \$543 million during the same period, up 7.6 percent.

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[\[back\]](#)