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SURPRISE: MAYOR IS BACK

Dyer's return brings smiles downtown

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The forces behind the effort to rebuild and invigorate downtown Orlando welcomed the end of the city's mayoral crisis Wednesday.

With Buddy Dyer heading back to the city's helm, a substantial chunk of uncertainty about the future is gone. His support for downtown development, an improved arena and a new performing-arts center are well-known.

"It's good for the city that this cloud has been lifted," said Barry Miller, a downtown investor and developer for more than a decade.

Dyer's indictment in March raised concerns that the city's unprecedented development boom — there is more than \$1.5 billion in development or in the pipeline — could be derailed by political uncertainty.

Cameron Kuhn, one of downtown's most active developers and a strong Dyer supporter, earlier partially blamed the crisis for Kuhn's decision to kill plans for a 10-story office building as part of his redevelopment of the block at Orange Avenue and Washington Street.

He also cited rising construction costs and misgivings about the tower's location.

Reached Wednesday while vacationing in Maryland, Kuhn said he was delighted with the turn of events.

"Now we're off and running as a city with a leader who believes in development," he said. "It's great news."

Kuhn said a stable market and leadership are

musts for business over the long term. However, the news did not change his decision to abandon the 10-story tower.

The performing-arts center has been a downtown priority for years, and a better arena is viewed as essential to preventing the Orlando Magic from relocating.

The arts center has been envisioned as costing \$150 million to \$200 million. A volunteer group is working to find ways to finance the project.

Craig Ustler, president of Ustler Development Inc., said the decision puts "everything back on course for Mayor Dyer and his downtown agenda."

Ustler previously predicted no short-term impact but expressed concern that the upheaval could threaten plans for a new or revamped arena and a performing-arts center.

Margo Knight, president of United Arts of Central Florida, said Dyer's return would be a stabilizing influence and that she expects his commitment to the arts to continue.

Dyer also was involved in creating the Florida Interactive Entertainment Academy,

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'One thing we're sure of: Business doesn't like uncertainty.'

— **DAVID SCOTT**, UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL FLORIDA ECONOMICS PROFESSOR

opening at the downtown Expo Centre in August. The University of Central Florida academy, considered a major boost for the city center, will train students in entertainment technology.

Settlement of Dyer's problems "is reinforcement of the plans we have going, and everything is on track," said Dan Holsenbeck, UCF vice president.

An immediate impact could be felt in the drive to renovate TD Waterhouse Centre, the home of the Orlando Magic.

The issue promises to be a touchy subject for Dyer, with polls consistently showing residents do not support building a new arena with public dollars. At the same time, team officials have not said whether they would be happy with a renovated arena.

State Rep. David Simmons, R-Longwood, who is pushing the Legislature to give the city \$99 million for the project,

was working with local leaders to draft a letter of community support for the project when he heard the news.

"Immediately, I said, 'Hey, have the mayor sign the letter,'" Simmons said.

More than anything, though, the passing of the crisis should calm the business community.

"One thing we're sure of: Business doesn't like uncertainty," said David Scott, an economics professor at UCF.

Orange County Mayor Rich Crotty agreed, saying Dyer's return to office marks a new beginning. He said the county and city can work together on issues such as the arts center and the arena.

As many as 6,000 condos are either under construction or in planning for the city center. The projects under way include the 55 West tower on West Church Street and The VUE at Lake Eola on Rosalind Avenue.

Kuhn also is pushing the largest single redevelopment project in the city's history, the \$140 million Premier Trade Plaza at South Orange Avenue and Church Street. That project would include downtown's first movie theater in decades.

Frank Billingsley, executive director of the Downtown Development Board, said he saw no negative business impact from the controversy.

"It's great that this distraction has been put to rest," he said. "Businesses do look for predictability and stability."