For most of its existence Raleigh, North Carolina was a small city. Founded as the state capital in 1792 its major industry was state government. While other cities in North Carolina such as Wilmington, Greensboro and Charlotte flourished in the 19th and early 20th centuries, Raleigh was content with moderate and measured growth.

But things changed after World War II when the state government founded Research Triangle Park (RTP) to take advantage of expertise at three major research universities in the area: University of North Carolina, North Carolina State, and Duke University. When IBM moved into RTP in 1959 with 13,000 employees, the growth race was on so that today Raleigh has more than quadrupled its population since 1960.

Further fueling Raleigh’s recent growth is a growing list of accolades: the number one place tech staffers would like to live, a top ten city for grads just starting out, and a top ten city for economic growth and opportunity. It is not just about work either, it is also the #5 best metro area for dating and one of the ten coolest places to eat.

Amidst this growth Raleigh has worked to preserve its past. It has eight local historic districts and 171 local landmarks, as well as 27 National Register historic districts and 95 landmarks. As befitting its small city history, these districts and landmarks are primarily clustered around downtown. As with current trends across the country, Raleigh’s downtown growth and popularity is surging. These development pressures are squeezing Raleigh’s historic resources.

Although only six percent of Raleigh’s residential housing stock was built before 1950, it is still viewed by many as standing in the way of...
progress and growth. In National Register districts where no local historic review occurs, houses can be torn down and replaced by larger, more expensive houses. The desire for larger houses is reflected in local districts with increased demand for large additions. In a worst-case scenario, lots were removed from one local residential district to build a hotel.

Commercial historic districts face even more pressure. Small-scale buildings do not provide sufficient return for escalating land values. Zoning requests to build taller buildings are routinely approved. The commercial districts are quickly losing their local flavor to look like streets in any growing city.

Fortunately, Raleigh has a committed preservation community that works to help city officials and residents understand that preservation and development are not only compatible but that historic preservation enhances development. The community includes citizens who are passionate about preserving Raleigh’s history and attend meetings, charrettes, tours, and other events that promote preservation. The Raleigh Historic Development Commission (RHDC) is composed of those citizens who are able and willing to commit time every month to preservation. The non-profit preservation community is represented by Preservation North Carolina and Capital Area Preservation among others. The ultimate will of the people is represented by City Council who makes the decisions on what will be preserved.

The community response to development has ranged from increased interest by neighborhoods who want to learn more about becoming a local district to grassroots activism pushing to preserve endangered resources. Sometimes the community response causes heartburn that, surprisingly, leads to a preservation win. For Raleigh, that heartburn started with the RHDC’s approval for a newly constructed house with a contemporary design in the city’s oldest historic district. Many residents of the district were adamantly opposed to the design and appealed the decision. The controversy occurred just as the RHDC was seeking approval.
from City Council on revamped Design Guidelines.

The citizens who questioned the RHDC’s decision asked Council to include in the guidelines a provision that new construction and additions resemble old construction. In response, the City Council asked the RHDC to conduct additional public outreach to assess the desires of the citizens.

The controversy led to press coverage not just in Raleigh but even further afield, the New York Times and Vanity Fair among others weighed in. All this attention led to large public meetings and community conversations about what historic preservation means. There were even public discussions by non-preservationists about the nuances of the National Park Service’s Preservation Brief 14 – New Exterior Additions to Historic Buildings.

In the end the residents lost their appeal and the City Council sided with the RHDC’s revision to the Design Guidelines. But the results of the controversy were that preservation became a topic of interest in the middle of a development boom and the RHDC learned the need to continually work to keep the community, and more importantly City Council, informed on the significance of historic preservation.

Another lesson from the controversy is to be prepared and plan ahead. For the RHDC that meant having a few ideas and projects sketched out even though funding was not readily available. So when the City Council asked us what could be done to promote historic preservation, we didn’t have to say, “We’ll get back to you on that,” we were able to say, “Let’s do a preservation toolkit.” We laid out an idea of what it might look like and suggested Council appropriate money for us to hire a consultant. And they did.

**Preservation Toolkit**

The Toolkit begins by analyzing the current framework of preservation related policies. These include Raleigh’s 2030 Comprehensive Plan,
unified development ordinance, state enabling legislation and the RHDC’s current powers. The analysis showed that some existing powers were under-utilized and many aspects of policies were over-regulatory, i.e. a lot of stick without much carrot.

The consultants looked at the variety of historic resources in Raleigh with a particular emphasis on the downtown commercial district. This quote from economic and historic preservation expert Donovan Rypkema was a guiding principle for the design of the Toolkit,

“The planning can never be about stasis – grass grows, leaves fall, rainfall varies, trees increase in size and then at some point die. The historic urban landscape recognizes that cities, too, are never in stasis…they grow, sometimes shrink, change and evolve in multiple ways. So the management of the historic fabric within a city is not successful if approached from a ‘freeze in place’ standpoint; rather it should be approached first through the identification of the heritage and then the appropriate management, protection, and enhancement of that fabric.”

There were four primary criteria that were used to evaluate potential preservation tools:
- Cost to the City
- Effectiveness
- Complexity
- Likely acceptance by stakeholders

The Toolkit proposes a mosaic of incentives that include financial tools, regulatory tools, community engagement tools, knowledge and planning tools and direction action tools.

The financial tools proposed are building rehabili-
tation grants and building retro-fit loans. These tools would provide incentives to developers by reducing capital cost and improving financing with only a moderate amount of complexity. They have proven effective in other locales and have been met with high stakeholder approval. However, the cost to the city is moderate to high.

**Regulatory tools** include transferable development rights, historic districts as affordable housing overlays and streamline rehabilitation projects. Transfer of development rights allow a builder to transfer some of the height lost to a preservation project to other parts of the project or another development within a specified zone. While this would have low to moderate-costs to the city and have a high stakeholder approval, they have not been particularly effective in other locales, primarily due to their high complexity.

Historic districts as affordable housing overlays has a low-cost to the city but mixed stakeholder approval and has high complexity in regulating costs. Streamlining rehabilitation projects by providing one-stop shopping for historic preservation projects improves the investment environment with a low-cost to the city. It has been moderately successful in other locales while having moderate complexity and high stakeholder approval.

The **community engagement tool** would encourage citizens to assist in conducting surveys of potential historic places. Although this is a way to involve the population at-large in historic preservation and has high stakeholder approval, it has not been particular effective where it has been utilized. This may be due to its moderate to high complexity.

The knowledge and planning tool involves the city buying properties during the demolition delay period. While this has high stakeholder approval and effectiveness in preserving historically significant properties, it can have high costs for the city and high complexity in marketing and selling the properties.

The **direct action tool** of enhancing the Raleigh Preservation Fund would provide the financing for grants, loans and acquisitions. It is an effective tool for preservation but comes with the costs and complexities associated with the other tools.

The final design of the Toolkit is still under consideration with City Council, consultants and citizens assessing the options and advantages. We have learned several things from our bumps and skirmishes with rapid development. Some are as simple as repeating successes, others may be more abstract such as having unfunded goals on hand for when an opportunity arises. And of course, always look for those opportunities.

To encourage and promote preservation even in times of surging development it is perhaps most important to make and maintain relationships with the stakeholders in preservation, the citizens who appreciate it, the councilors who make the decisions and developers and property owners who maintain historic properties.