

## **PA PAC Questionnaire for Durham Board of County Commissioners – 2024**

Please return the completed form along with your resume or biographical statement describing education, work history, community service, and prior political experience as soon as possible, but by Wednesday, January 3 at 5pm at the latest.

*Please also include a high resolution headshot for the PA mailer in case you are endorsed.*

Please email your responses to the PAC coordinators at [papacboard@googlegroups.com](mailto:papacboard@googlegroups.com) by

**Wednesday, January 3 at 5pm**

Please note that following the Wednesday, January 3 at 5pm deadline, the People's Alliance PAC may publish your responses to this questionnaire and your resume.

When answering this questionnaire, please repeat the questions in your response document with each question numbered and organized as it appears here. Type your responses in italics, bold, or a different font to distinguish your responses from the questions. Do not use colors or shading.

Please try to confine your responses to no more than 300 words unless another word limit is indicated. Do not feel obliged to exhaust the limit for each question.

If you use words or ideas from another person, please attribute your source.

Thank you for completing this questionnaire and your willingness to serve the people of Durham.

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### **Government and the Public Good**

**1. Of all the issues confronting Durham County, which single issue is most important to you and why? What would you do about it if you are elected?**

The single most critical issue facing all of Durham County is economic inequity. The entrenched inequities growing every day in our county contribute to almost all aspects of an individual's life from birth—including, but not limited to: the educational achievement gap, lack of access to housing, unequal health outcomes, and wage disparities. If I'm lucky enough to be reelected, I will continue to marshal every tool at my disposal to address said inequities. That starts with continuing to fight for a true living wage of \$23 an hour for all county employees, setting the standard for a pay rate across Durham County that actually matches the rising cost of living. But it certainly doesn't end there. It also includes fighting for universal pre-K, affordable housing, and union recognition across sectors to confront the downstream

consequences of economic stratification. County policy impacts every part of our residents' lives, and we have the power to enhance equality and justice at every step.

**2. How can county government use its authority and its resources to direct jobs to those who most need them and to lift the wages of the lowest-paid workers in Durham?**

The County Commission is committed to raising wages and promoting the dignity of every worker in Durham County and across the state. To that end, we've organized a coalition of support not just within our county, but also, beyond it, to garner state-level investment in public education, Medicaid expansion, and more. In the service of our neighbors, we must go above and beyond the typical duties of county government to win support from unexpected allies and powerbrokers. Throughout my term, I've worked extensively with state legislators, served on the state Association of County Commissioners as an at-large director, and broadly leveraged my relationships in red counties to pressure state leaders to change their agenda. I'm incredibly proud of the progress we've made, which includes hiring a lobbyist to advocate for our county at the state level. As the newly elected chair of the Board of County Commissioners, I am committed to continuing this fight—and making life more affordable for every working family in Durham County.

**Education, etc**

**3. What issues do you see with school construction and student school assignment? What role should race equity play with regard to school construction and student assignment? Please address cost overruns that have reduced the reach of the last education bond.**

The school choice movement and private school vouchers have been massive resource drains on our community—and have caused a renewed period of white flight from public schools across the district. According to the most recent statistics, more than 80% of DPS students are nonwhite, a proportion completely out of step with the county at large.

This is a serious problem—an unconstitutional one, at that. We just passed the largest school bond in county history, which will improve access for so many children; but your zip code shouldn't determine your access to resources or your ability to encounter diversity. We need to get on a regular bond schedule to make sure all students have access to high quality, diverse, inclusive learning environments that attract students of all backgrounds back from private schools and charters. We need to limit the reach and construction of charters and private school vouchers. And we need to analyze all of our policies in Durham County—especially when it comes to education—through a lens of racial equity, which is the only way to assure our systems actually serve the community in the first place.

**4. What are your thoughts about the expansion of the HEART program to schools? How do you envision HEART interacting with the SRO program, both in terms of funding and within schools themselves?**

The HEART program is an incredible City of Durham intervention that works to limit armed interactions in public safety responses; I'm extremely supportive of its expansion. As we do so, our goal should not be to reinvent the wheel, but rather, to work in coalition with the city to implement the program across the county—including in our schools.

That being said, part of ensuring a seamless transition means securing long-term community buy-in from parents, teachers, and students, so that our families see the HEART program as critical to school safety. Talking to school faculty, staff, students, and parents, I often hear that SROs provide a feeling of security, particularly in schools with higher reported instances of violence. We have to take that fundamental reality into account as we worked to limit armed presence in our schools. Over time, through direct conversations and new programming, we can introduce high-quality, trained HEART personnel into the school safety model with widespread support from all the necessary stakeholders—because ultimately, the HEART approach is the best way to treat our young people with the dignity they deserve.

**5. Library staff have asked for an increased workforce, in part to support Sunday opening hours, but in the bigger picture, to enable one of the highest rated County services to fully function. As County Commissioner, how would you support, preserve, and grow the staff and programs of the library? How would you get input from library staff in the process of doing so?**

Our libraries are a powerful resource—and one of the most widely used services across the county. In Durham and across the country, libraries are beacons of knowledge access, community connection, literary development, and simply having a place to belong. We need all of our residents to have access not just to books but to all of the libraries' crucial resources: hotspots, internet, computers, printers. I am committed to getting our libraries open seven days a week, as are my colleagues.

At the same time, as we work toward that goal, we have another obligation to our employees. We need to prevent burnout, overwork, and exhaustion. We need to fill the existing vacant positions that have been open for months. Personally, I'm grateful for the one-on-one conversations I've had with library staff so far, hearing their concerns, and taking them back to county leadership. But we're also taking formal steps to gather input, to ensure that library staff are fully empowered in the decision making process.

This starts with our county manager, who showcases a true employee-first managing style. She has shared with me that her top priority is addressing gaps in employment through both an internal and an external audit of county operations in all services, including the libraries. We know that there are colleagues across the county who may feel more comfortable sharing their candid feedback with an external partner, which is why we're aligned around this dual process.

With the results of the audit in mind, we can make good on our commitment as a commission to provide seven days of library service—and we can do it the right way, with our employees leading the way.

## **Housing, Planning, and Neighborhoods**

**6. What planning policies and priorities do you wish to see emerge from the on-going review and revision of Durham's Uniform Development Ordinance?**

The most important change I hope to see in our Unified Development Ordinance is the integration of community feedback and input in the update. As with everything we do, our goal is to further city-county alignment on the impact of development on our residents. In particular, our rural residents need to share the issues they face, and the city needs to be more responsive to their needs in the ordinance revision. By collecting input in a careful process, we can make sure the review aligns with resident needs, rather than developer requests.

**7. Should the County expand permanently supportive housing? What do you see as the role of PSH in community reentry? What other roles does it play?**

The county is committed to expanding permanently supportive housing—in fact, we’ve taken important strides to do so just this year. In partnership with incredible organizations like Housing for New Hope, we voted this June to maintain the Carver Creek apartments as affordable housing, and expand them to provide onsite substance abuse treatment, mental health care, and wraparound support for residents. We need to continue to find more opportunities to maintain protective covenants where possible, rather than letting affordable housing expire and convert to market rate—and expand our PSH offerings with onsite services. Through these innovative new approaches, we can provide a safer, healthier community for some of our most marginalized neighbors.

**County Finances, Transportation, Incentives, and Services**

**8. What is your position on providing public incentives to private firms to promote economic development in Durham? How can county government use development incentives to promote more widely shared prosperity, including better jobs and higher wages for Durham residents?**

Since the days of Black Wall Street, Durham has always been a hub for innovation, entrepreneurship, and business development. Our county should continue to seek out economic development and attract new businesses, but we should also continue pushing these companies to hire Durham residents through partnerships with our public schools, Durham Tech, and other jobs training programs across the county. In addition, we should take into account the environmental impact of each company—promoting sustainable building certifications for offices, sustainable life cycle analysis for manufacturing to minimize waste and carbon emissions, and overall enforcing restrictions on pollution that damages our residents’ quality of life.

In addition, as more companies come to Durham County, we should recommit to expanding our tax assistance programs that keep longtime residents in place—so that rising property values don’t exacerbate an ongoing displacement crisis. We have strong programs targeting seniors, veterans, low-income residents, and more, and we ought to reinforce and expand them to relieve the burden of property taxes across the county.

**9. What non-traditional programs (such as public banking, community investment trusts, community development venture capital) could Durham County implement to reduce economic inequality in our community?**

The county should marshal all available resources to expand our budget and our capacity to finance vital services. We should absolutely continue collaborating with community investment trusts like the Durham Community Land Trust, public banking, and development capital—and we should also make creative use of federal funds to maximize our dollars deployed across the county. For example: through the American Rescue Plan Act, Durham County received over \$62 million to support broadband access, housing insecurity, food insecurity, revenue loss, and infrastructure reinforcement. By collaborating with local banks and economic empowerment organizations to leverage the federal funds to generate more revenue, we have been able to maximize those resources for creative community development through guaranteed basic income, education and workforce development, new permanent supportive housing,

and more. With so many restrictions on local power coming from the state legislature, we have to be more creative than ever about how we fund and scale projects across the county.

#### **10. What should be the principal components of a new public transit plan for Durham County?**

Every survey we take regarding transit comes back with the same overwhelming results: Durham County residents want more buses. We need to listen to our residents. Yes, we want large scale projects, which is why we're looking at the passenger rail and other inter-county options; but the most effective way we can serve Durham County's current needs is by expanding the bus program to assure the quality, consistency, and reliability of service.

In all of these projects, we should act in close collaboration between county and city to marshal our shared resources wisely. And we should go after federal dollars as aggressively as possible, because we have the vision to think bigger and we need a budget to match. Finally, on bus and rail options alike, we should work in line with our neighboring counties—Wake, Orange, and Chatham—to model connected transit for North Carolina and across the country.

#### **11. What, if anything, should the county do to distribute the property tax burden with greater equity and fairness?**

Durham must continue to strive for growth without sacrificing dignity—in other words, economic growth and business development that controls gentrification and keeps longtime homeowners firmly rooted in our community. In keeping with that goal, the Board of County Commissioners passed a strong tax relief package specifically targeted to aging community members, disabled residents, veterans, and low-income residents. The tax relief program ensures that these vulnerable members of our community can remain in their homes despite the rising cost of living—and continue to benefit from the economic growth they've helped generate.

Our agenda also focuses in particular on historically Black neighborhoods, which have been destroyed, displaced, and disrupted over decades of redlining and disinvestment throughout Durham County. Today, our task is not just to preserve existing Black neighborhoods in Durham, but to repair for the harm caused and rebuild—with new investment in historic Hayti. We can and must continue to shift the burden of property tax away from historical Black neighborhoods wherever possible, to preserve these communities and prevent further displacement.

#### **Justice and Law Enforcement**

#### **12. Explain how you see the County's role in overseeing the Durham jail. Under what circumstances, if any, should the county take intervening action to improve the lives of incarcerated individuals?**

The county plays an interesting role with respect to the Durham jail. Though we provide the Sheriff's budget, the Sheriff is an elected official in their own right, and we are not their boss. That said, we have an obligation to work for a more just, equal, and effective justice system that treats our justice-involved neighbors with the dignity and respect they deserve.

In keeping with those efforts, I serve on the Justice Services Board, where our overarching goal is to reduce recidivism. This is where the county can play our most important and effective role in improving

the lives of justice-involved individuals. Because so many factors go into an individual's likelihood to recidivate, or commit a crime in the first place: lack of mental health support, housing, education, jobs, community, and public transit. Unfortunately, as is true across the country, in Durham County, our jail can often operate as a stand-in for mental health treatment. We need to ramp up our investments in mental health support and substance abuse treatment beyond jail, so that incarceration is not seen as an option for locking away folks in crisis. In addition, when it comes to housing, education, jobs, public transit, and more, we need to provide wraparound reentry services, so that the transition out of incarceration is supported and successful. And finally, the county is invested in and should expand our many diversion programs, so we can provide alternatives to incarceration in the first place.

**13. What is your position on expanding the HEART program to be county-wide, fully staffed, and available 24/7? Which of those are your top priorities? How would you work to overcome resistance to HEART from some in law enforcement?**

As stated above, I am a proud supporter of the HEART program and look forward to helping initiate its expansion across the county. This should be a multi-step, long-term process in collaboration with the city, to make sure all personnel are aligned and that there are no gaps in employment before we expand access and hours, particularly in regards to the call centers, which are integral to the HEART program.

Though there has been some resistance to the HEART program from law enforcement, I've talked to many officers who are incredibly supportive of the program. Across the county, our officers are exhausted. They're understaffed; they're responding to calls that don't actually apply to them, and implementing the HEART program would ultimately lighten their load and allow them to focus on severe cases, rather than mental health crises that can be deescalated by our HEART officials. Over time, these services will become a necessary component of our public safety approach, with buy-in from all stakeholders.

**Health Care and Social Services**

**14. As profiled recently in a 3-part *Assembly/WBTV* series, Durham County has the second-slowest reunification rate in the state for children in foster care. As a County Commissioner, what steps would you propose to help families thrive in Durham County and prevent involuntary family separation?**

Time and again, the data has shown that keeping families together is best—for children's wellbeing, for overall family stability, and for the safety of all of our residents. We need to get from a model of responding to crisis to a proactive approach that prevents crisis, and keeps families together from the beginning.

That's why I was so proud to spearhead the guaranteed income program, because when we put extra money in the hands of families with children, their likelihood to interact with DSS goes down. So many times, involuntary separations just come down to our families needing a little extra support to navigate medical bills, groceries, childcare, and all the other costs that come with raising a family. At present, we provide foster parents with funding to care for foster children—why don't we provide those resources to the families themselves, and give them the cushion they need to stay together?

Unfortunately, there will still be extreme cases of child abuse or violence where where for the child's safety and wellbeing they should be out of the house. But we should limit that option wherever possible, and support families with children before crisis strikes.

**15. What do you think about the balance between confidentiality and transparency related to families impacted by involuntary separation in the foster care system? Should these courtrooms be open to the public? What should Durham parents do if they feel their child has been wrongfully taken from them? Would you meet with and listen to a parent in this situation?**

Experts and evidence from other states have continuously shown that courtroom transparency provides better outcomes for kids, families, and the community at large, restoring trust in our system. Former Chief Administrative Judge for the State of New York Jonathan Lippman even said in 2010, “Opening family courts has been 100 percent positive with no negative.”

The fact of the matter is, secret courtrooms don’t protect our kids; they don’t protect anyone. So we need transparency. But in addition, we need serious reforms to adjust our broken system in favor of family reunification. At present, within the social services environment, we are understaffed, cases move slowly, and the court system itself is uncondusive to working families. Parents often show up to their court date after taking off work from an hourly job, only to wait there all day without their case being heard. When a new date is scheduled, they have an impossible choice between skipping the court date and risking their job, hurting their family more and more. We need to create a collaborative approach, bringing in the District Attorney, Chief District Court Judge, Public Defenders office, community advocates, and social workers to make this process function better, with reasonable schedules for cases. We need to rotate judges for sensitive cases, both for the judges’ sake and for the children’s, because getting desensitized to trauma harms just outcomes.

Finally, I absolutely commit to meeting with parents in the process of reunifying their families. As County Commissioners, it’s on each of us to be responsive to resident needs, and even as we structurally reform the process, we should constantly be in conversation with individual cases, too.

## **Civil Rights**

**16. What are the principal issues facing the Latinx and immigrant communities in Durham and how should the county address them?**

I am the daughter of Indian and Pakistani immigrants—nothing could be closer to my heart than making sure that every immigrant has a place in Durham County. This means not just a touchy-feely, emotional idea of welcoming new neighbors, but a structural, intentional effort to meet immigrants and refugees where they’re at.

To start, despite important strides, we still retain language access barriers across the city and the county. Though we have translation available for most resources, the translation copy has to be requested—our goal is to have it readily available, no inquiry needed. Particularly for our Latinx community, the fastest growing population in the county, this means embracing a bilingual approach, where Spanish resources are seamlessly integrated into county services.

In service of the 45,000 immigrants and refugees who call Durham County home, we’ve also hired an amazing Immigrant and Refugee Affairs Coordinator both the city and the county, Kokou Nayo, who comes out of the refugee services world himself. In the coming years, we want to see an expansion of that role to accommodate growing need. In partnership with interfaith communities, we should make it a priority to bring county resources to immigrants and refugees, rather than the other way around—in

recognition of the fact that coming to government buildings, seeking government help can feel like a risk for already-marginalized members of our community. Access to jobs, housing, health care, and social services are the significant issues facing Latinx and immigrant communities—and it's on the county to bring those resources directly to them.

**17. At a time when the LGBTQ community is under attack by the NC legislature, what can the County do to provide as much protection to this community as possible?**

Our county proudly boasts one of the most robust nondiscrimination ordinances of any city, town, or county in North Carolina. In the face of ongoing attacks on the LGBTQ community at the state and national levels, our imperative is to enforce that nondiscrimination ordinance by proactively protecting our trans and queer neighbors every day.

We pride ourselves on the high representation of LGBTQ colleagues across county staff—and in both internal and external conversations, we constantly hear that schools are the most painful battleground in the right-wing war on trans and queer youth. As such, we are coming prepared with new programming in our schools, from mental health resources on campus to guidelines for inclusive language in the classroom. We won't cower in the face of these attacks, especially when so many young people still consistently share with me that they're not able to be open about their gender identities with their families. We need to protect the right to free expression for everyone, but especially for the next generation.

That also means making sure we have a seamless process for folks going through a legal name change at any stage. The county houses public records and licenses for thousands of residents, and this is one of the fastest and most effective ways we can assist our neighbors in transitioning without discrimination, trauma, or fear. We're talking to trans people throughout Durham County—particularly trans people of color—about how best to streamline the current process, so that it takes one engagement rather than innumerable.

Finally, though all of these services are important, we cannot stop the attacks on our LGBTQ residents if we don't fight them at the source: the state legislature. That's why we're proud to have hired a lobbyist to advocate for our county at the state level, so that we can gather power for non-discrimination legislation even beyond Durham County.