

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 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.

Candidate's name: **Michelle Burton**

Address: **P.O. Box 25504, Durham, NC 27701**

E-mail Address: **michellebfordurham@gmail.com**

Phone: **919-283-9550**

Website: <https://michellefordurham.com/>

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 important issue to me is housing, with public education a very close second. As a veteran educator with over almost 30 years of teaching experience, I am seeing how the high cost of housing affects my students, their families, and my colleagues. They are being priced out of Durham County and are moving to more affordable locations such as Granville, Alamance, and Person Counties. I am particularly concerned about this issue because as a Black Durham resident, I am seeing that many African-American residents are not able to purchase a home. Homeownership is the number one way that most Americans build wealth.

According to the 2020 US Census, 44% of African Americans own homes in Durham County versus 75% of Whites. This statistic is very concerning to me and is one of the main causes of the racial wealth gap. Even though the City of Durham plays a much bigger role in housing, the City and County need to work together to solve this issue. If elected to the Durham County Board of Commissioners I would do the following to help alleviate the homeownership gap:

- ***Working with the City of Durham elected officials on how the city and county electeds can work together to continue to fund the Down Payment Assistance Program. The City and County must work together to ensure residents can purchase homes and build generational wealth.***
- ***Continue to fund the Low-Income Property Tax Relief program provided through the Department of Social Services. I will also look at how to streamline the application process so more Durham County residents who need these services can access them.***
- ***Working with other County Commissioners to build affordable housing units for frontline workers (educators, police officers, firefighters, etc) on county-owned property so these valuable employees can live in the place where they work.***
- ***Incentivize businesses coming to Durham County to pay liveable wages so workers can afford to live in Durham County***
- ***Prioritize that Durham County Government employees and Durham Public School employees are paid liveable wages so these workers can afford to live in Durham County.***

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 one thing that the Board of County Commissioners has under their control is how much Durham County Government and Durham Public School workers are compensated. If elected to BOCC I will work towards making sure the workers of both entities are paid liveable wages not only because it is the right thing to do, but it will set a standard for businesses who would want to locate here. As far as the county government using its authority and resources to lift the lowest-paid workers' wages and to direct jobs to those most in need, I would do the following if elected:

- ***Work with other commissioners to continue to fund and increase funding of the Durham Tech Promise program to ensure that high school graduates can affordably access secondary education and develop the skills to enter the job market or continue to a four-year college or university.***
- ***Work with other commissioners to continue to fund and increase funding for the Durham Tech Back to Work Initiative to support residents in furthering their job skills.***
- ***Develop a policy around business incentives that companies wanting incentives from Durham County must provide a living wage to their employees.***
- ***Provide funding to nonprofits that offer Employment Hubs. Employment Hubs offer assistance with common barriers to work such as transportation and child care, along with worker development services such as practice interviews, resume writing, etc.***

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 situation that we are currently experiencing with the building of the new Durham School of the Arts (DSA) is indicative of a larger problem: The capital needs of school buildings were not being prioritized over a long period. Now, as a county, we are paying a tremendous cost. During my last year as president of the Durham Association of Educators (DAE), we did a campaign around getting our members to support the bond that was on the ballot in the fall of 2022 as well as working with other community partners to advocate for the bond. The initial cost of building a new DSA was \$108.7 million. Now it is \$241 million. The money that was earmarked to repair 13 other elementary schools in DPS will be further delayed to build a new DSA, many of them serving primarily students of color, such as Eastway and Bethesda Elementary. Several DPS buildings are in poor shape, therefore, regular bonds should be placed on the ballot to address these needs. As far as race equity with regards to school construction, I see this more of an issue of county government over a long period not prioritizing the enormous capital needs of public schools in our county. Now DPS has to choose which schools to focus on for renovations and repairs and unfortunately, it is the schools in the most marginalized communities that get short-changed. To address this, more capital funding needs to be given to DPS in their annual budget and regular bonds need to be on the ballot every four years so we can fix school buildings and not always play catch up. Then, in my opinion, you would not have these equity issues, because all schools would be given the funding that is needed to ensure the buildings are in good shape.

With the school assignment plan that was just passed, Growing Together, one of the biggest issues was with communication with DPS parents and staff to implement such a drastic change in school boundaries and themes. Like with school construction, school assignments had not been changed in 30 years and probably should have been done sooner. I started my career in DPS in 1994, two years after the merger of the city and county school districts and I have seen firsthand how the neighborhoods have changed in that time. Race equity should have played a role in the school assignment plan because we want to ensure that our most marginalized students have access to magnet programs and other specialized programs. I am glad that DPS took into account the racial breakdown and median household income for each of the regions that were created in the Growing Together plan. Is the plan perfect? No. However, it is a start in ensuring that all of our students have access to specialty and magnet programs.

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?

Expanding the HEART program to schools would be an excellent idea. I currently work at an elementary school where there aren't any SROs but I have worked at a middle school in Durham in the early 2000's and saw where SROs use their law enforcement powers on middle school children, particularly Black children, which was very disturbing to watch. I know the SRO program has changed drastically since then, the role now being more of an informal counselor. Still, one of their primary roles is to enforce laws. If we had the HEART program in schools, I envision HEART staff being the primary people dealing with students and de-escalating situations before they get out of hand. As far as envisioning the HEART Program interacting with SRO I can see where SROs would not be used as much in the schools because a HEART team would be called in to deal with the many situations that occur in middle and high schools. If I am elected to the county commission, I would be willing to fund a pilot program to see how effective this initiative would be and if it should be expanded throughout all middle and high schools.

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?

For nine years, I worked at the Durham County Library as a substitute library staff person. My primary role was to fill in for library workers in the evenings and on weekends so they would not work over their 37.5 hours a week. The public libraries were open until 9pm M-Thursday, Saturday until 6pm and the main library was open from 2-6pm on Sunday. If the county library does not provide these positions anymore, they should bring them back so permanent workers are not working long hours. In doing my research for this question, I looked up the library funding in the 2023-2024 Durham County Budget and was surprised that the library budget was not as large as I thought it would be for a county with so many people. In my opinion, more funding is required to provide more accessibility to the county library, not only for staff positions but for programming and materials and I would advocate for that if elected to the county commission. As far as getting input from library staff, I would be more than happy to meet with library workers to listen to their concerns. I believe all workers should be able to have conversations with elected officials about their working conditions.

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?

Reading the Comprehensive Plan that was adopted in June, 2023, it was great to read all the community feedback from residents of Durham County in giving their thoughts and ideas on what is needed to make our city and county a more equitable place to live. The priorities I wish to see in the revision of the Durham's UDO:

- ***Transportation with easier connectivity to other parts of Durham County.***
- ***Neighborhoods with sidewalks, bike lanes and easier access to amenities.***
- ***Creative housing solutions that are affordable and safe.***

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?

I am in total support of the County expanding permanently supportive housing. In learning about the acquisition of the Carver Creek Apartments in June of 2023, I was excited that the City and County came together to purchase the property to keep these units affordable and to make it a place where people can rebuild their lives without having to worry about affordable and safe housing. I also see the PSH as similar to the Community Schools model that is currently housed at three DPS schools, where much-needed services are brought into the schools to support students and families. Concerning community reentry, many people coming back home from being incarcerated have difficulty securing housing because of having a criminal record. Permanently supportive housing would be a wonderful solution to help formerly incarcerated people get on their feet again and become functioning community members. I would be in total support of expanding PSH's in Durham County if elected to the Board of County Commissioners.

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?

According to the report titled, Building Shared Prosperity: How Communities Can Create Good Jobs for All by the Upjohn Institute, business incentives are often a waste of taxpayer money because they are poorly targeted and designed. According to the report, "For every 100 new jobs that might be created by incentives, only around 20 go to local residents, and the rest to in-migrants."

If we do provide business incentives, the following should be considered:

- 1. Create a policy that businesses that receive incentives from the county should pay a livable wage.***
- 2. Give incentives to businesses to hire residents who reside in Durham County.***
- 3. Require that businesses provide job training services to residents.***

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?

I would like for Durham County to implement a child trust fund program, which is better known as "Baby Bonds" to help build wealth with communities of color. African Americans and Hispanic households have much lower net wealth than White residents. [According to CNN](#), White households have a median net wealth of \$285,000 whereas African American and Hispanic households have a median net wealth of \$44,900 and \$61,600 respectively. Baby Bonds can be a solution to alleviating the wealth gap between people of color and Whites by funding savings accounts for babies when they

are born. It would be based on residents' income so children from lower-income families would receive more money in their savings. When these children become adults, they can use the money for college or other educational options that they so choose.

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

I would like to see the public transit plan have the following components:

- 1. There should be more service routes, particularly in South Eastern Durham Co.***
- 2. All bus stops should have benches and shelters, sidewalks, and other amenities to keep people safe.***
- 3. Buses should come every 15 minutes so patrons are not waiting outside long in unpleasant conditions.***
- 4. More service on the weekend and evenings.***

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

Because state laws mandate that all property tax be assessed at the same rate, that means Durham County Government can't charge higher property taxes on wealthy residents, which makes it a challenge to assist lower-income property owners with their tax bills. The property tax relief program for low-income homeowners is an excellent program offered by the County to shift some of this burden. I would like for the paperwork to be less burdensome so more residents can access this resource as well as more funding towards the program. If elected to the board of commissioners, I would want to work with my colleagues and Durham County staff to come up with creative solutions on how to lessen the burden of high property tax bills on our lower-income residents.

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 Durham County Jail falls under the jurisdiction of the Durham County Sheriff's Office. The Sheriff's Office is funded by the Durham County taxpayers and the Board of County Commissioners allocates the funding to the Sheriff's Office to operate the jail. Because of this relationship, the county should play a significant role in ensuring that the jail is safe and that the sheriff is maintaining safe facilities. Commissioners should hold the sheriff accountable if jail rules and safety protocols are not being followed. As of now, the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) is the state regulatory agency that enforces the Jail Rules and is the only agency that has the authority to impose a Plan of Correction (POC) if they find a Jail is not in compliance. According to a 2022 report by Disability Rights North Carolina, the regulatory laws regarding the county jails are antiquated and need to be revamped. Also, the Community Safety and Wellness Task Force recommended that conditions at the county jail needed much improvement and gave a list of recommendations on how to correct these

issues. If people's lives are in danger and if people are living in inhumane conditions, the county should take action to make sure these conditions are not tolerated. No one should lose their life or be treated inhumanely because they are in jail.

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?

I fully support the HEART program going countywide. To align with what the City of Durham is doing, I would like for the HEART program to start with being fully staffed for 12-hours a day, then eventually working toward 24-hour-a-day service. I would meet with law enforcement officials to listen to their concerns, but I am also of the opinion that providing data from the citywide HEART program showing that the program is effective would help combat resistance from law enforcement.

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?

I read the Assembly piece about Jatoia Potts losing her parental rights to her two children. I was flabbergasted, to say the least, that this can happen so easily in North Carolina courts. What bothered me was that this is happening to primarily Black families due to a lack of finances and a lack of knowledge on how the court system works.

What happened to Ms. Potts is due to systemic issues that have occurred over time. We need to provide families with the support that they need before child protection service steps in. I would propose the following so parents have the support and allies they need to be successful:

- 1. Provide Guaranteed Universal Income. Durham County is doing a pilot program and I would be in support of this continuing.***
- 2. Implement the recommendations by the Community Wellness Task Force regarding reforming Durham Social Services and Abuse/Neglect/Dependency Court***
- 3. Increase funding to Durham County Social Services to focus on child and family well-being to keep families together.***

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?

I do feel there should be some level of confidentiality and courtrooms not open to the public when dealing with issues regarding children. I am basing this reasoning on an experience that happened to me as a child with my family and I am glad that the general public was not allowed in the courtroom. However, I believe that expert witnesses should be allowed in the courtroom and attorneys should be able to confer with one another in private. There has to be some balance between confidentiality and attorneys having the ability to represent their clients. It does not have to be one or the other. If parents feel their child has been wrongfully taken from them, they have every right to advocate for gaining their parental rights back and yes I would meet and listen to a parent in this situation, if it was needed.

Civil Rights

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

The language barrier is still a principal issue for the Latinx community as well as crime being targeted towards these community members. Also, many people in the Latinx and immigrant communities are undocumented, they are not able to access safety net programs such as Medicaid and SNAP benefits. To address these issues, the county needs to make sure all of these initiatives are occurring:

- 1. All communication that comes from Durham County needs to be in English and Spanish.***
- 2. The DCSO should be regularly recruiting and hiring bilingual sheriff's deputies.***
- 3. There should be a Latinx/Immigrant liaison to assist our immigrant community members in locating resources that they may need.***

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?

I am very glad that the Durham County Commissioners passed an ordinance that prohibits discrimination in public places and in employment in Nov. 2021. This was very significant for our LGBTQ community members to feel a sense of safety and not being discriminated against because of their sexual orientation. Since 2021, two laws have been passed by the North Carolina legislature targeting the LGBTQ community and these laws were primarily directed towards public schools. We don't know what will continue to come down from Raleigh concerning the LGBTQ community. This legislature is unpredictable and they are using their power of preemption to take away governing power from municipalities. We need to work closely with our state delegation to ensure that discriminatory policies against the LGBTQ community do not become law in our state and push back on the NCGA if they try to pass discriminatory statutes.

Thank you for completing this questionnaire.

Please do not forget to provide us with your resume or biographical statement.