

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 5 pm** 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 5 pm

Please note that following the Wednesday, January 3 at 5 pm 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: **Brenda Howerton**

Address: **3325 Tarleton West, Durham, NC 27713**

E-mail Address: **brynda.howerton@gmail.com**

Website: **<https://brendahowerton.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 re-elected?

When re-elected, I pledge to continue to prioritize **affordable housing** as a human right, and a catalyst to improve the quality of life for the community. Recent residential and commercial growth has left many individuals and families displaced or strained financially. Rising costs and interest rates have placed further constraints on housing.

I am proud to have collaborated as a County Commissioner to bring a new housing model to the forefront to leverage County-owned land parcels to build affordable housing units in the East Main Street Corridor for households earning between 30 to 80% of AMI. With the support of the community, the county was able to quickly garner support and revise policy to make this significant investment. In addition to affordable housing, this project provides childcare and commercial space that is walkable and close to public transportation.

I will continue my efforts to support innovative concepts to deliver affordable housing to Durham residents. Federal investment will be key to meeting this primary need for shelter for many low- and moderate-income individuals and families.

2. How can the 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?

- A. Durham County has an exemplary record as a progressive leader in the fight to level the economic playing field through employment and income for those who need it most. In a thriving community and as an early leader on this issue, Durham County developed and implemented innovative policies to reduce income inequality and assure greater job development and opportunities by requiring government-supported contractors to pay a living wage. A dozen years have passed since the state's regulatory reform law was rescinded, which banned Durham County and other county/city policies that enforced that policy. While the county has consistently worked to raise the bar to provide job opportunities, training, and pay to raise families out of poverty, the North Carolina General Assembly has and continues to be, the singular and most significant barrier to bringing lasting change to increase wages.

I am proud to have voted for the Living Wage policy for the county's 2000 workers in compliance with federal and state law. Living wages are paid to full- and part-time employees, and seasonal employees. In this year's Classification and Compensation Study, an assessment of employees' salaries to area market salaries provided the foundation to bring the pay scale to a higher level and to further support the allocation of funds to keep employee salaries competitive. Classified or central services employees received an increase averaging 11 percent.

As an elected leader, I have fought for the county workforce to be paid a living wage for the public service they provide. I stand with all workers to earn a living wage, allowing them to afford to live where they work. I stand with organized labor to fight for living wages and safe workplaces in our community. County leaders can express support and an expectation from the business community to support employees with a living wage. I have and will continue to do so.

- B. As a Commissioner, I supported bond funding to Durham Tech to help residents earn credentials and build careers to sustain themselves and their families. I am a strong proponent of customized training created in conjunction with the actual and future needs of the business community, which leads to a skilled workforce for in-demand jobs. Durham Tech leads the county in its workforce development programs.

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.

School construction projects should be closely monitored to ensure that sufficient progress is made on projects and close adherence to project timelines. In my role as Chair of the Board of County Commissioners, I requested that staff work with the Durham Public Schools (DPS) administration to address accountability of education bond expenditures. The result was the selection of a bond program manager to closely monitor the projects. Unfortunately, the pandemic has severely impacted the construction industry and the cost of construction has dramatically increased. While Durham County is still in the process of finalizing cost estimates for projects in the last education bond, it appears that there are major increases in DPS project costs. The new projections for Durham School of the Arts are now at over \$200 million when it was originally estimated at \$140-\$150 million.

As with all matters related to county governance, decisions must be made with race equity as a primary consideration. The strength of Durham County is our diversity. It is important to ensure that facilities located in heavily populated minority communities and facilities that primarily serve minority students receive an equal amount of infrastructure resources and attention to repair and maintenance. Those facilities should not fall into a level of disrepair that negatively impacts the performance of the students and staff and/or becomes an eyesore to the community.

Student assignment is a delicate topic, I would never want to speak over the School System. As Durham grows, the challenge is to protect the vision held during the merger of the former Durham County and Durham City School systems. Namely, that public schools are not resegregated and I would suggest you speak with those in charge of making the school assignment plans.

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.

I support the expansion into schools. Programs like HEART allow the right people to respond to people in crisis, decreasing the risk of officer-involved shootings in mental health crises.

In a perfect world, I'd prefer HEART to be first responders in school incidents with SROs responding to the worst case scenarios like school shootings. An armed presence in schools is not optimal but has become acceptable in light of the proliferation of mass school shootings. When students have access to the resources they need like mental health professionals and social workers, we all win.

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 Commissioners, 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?

Firstly, I support more resources in order to support expanded library hours to include Sunday hours. I am a firm believer that our library's resources are a lifeline for student success and are among the most highly rated services in the county. I trust the qualified library director and staff to determine needs, gather staff input, and then report the findings to the board of commissioners.

That said, additional county financial support must be part of a discussion about expanding operating hours, increasing staffing, or adding new programs. Further, I would advocate for the additional funds requested by the library system in a future budget cycle once they have submitted a proposal for funding that takes their report into consideration.

6. What planning policies and priorities do you wish to see emerge from the ongoing review and revision of Durham's UDO?

I support protections for residents around "blast" sites. I'd like to see greater consideration of ancillary issues in zoning: environmental concerns, infrastructure needs, and public safety needs.

For planning policies and priorities to best reflect the needs and wants of the community, the UDO must be a living document, subject to frequent revision. At the city and county level, there will be opportunities for public hearings. I encourage community input in all areas where laws or regulations affect daily living. In order for our planning department to be able to meet the demands of requests for UDO text amendment changes, I would support the planning department changing their fee schedule depending on the size of the text amendment changes. It is the right of the public to request changes, but no request should hold our Planning Department hostage for a fee of about \$4500 dollars such as the SCAD proposal. The size of the changes requested needed a lot of support for the general public to understand, but the resources provided by the applicant is not enough to cover a more robust engagement, research, and recommendation process. We essentially absorbed the costs of such a process without enough resources from the applicant.

7. Should the county expand permanently supportive housing (PSH)? What do you see as the role of PSH in community re-entry? What other roles does it play?

Yes, the county should and does support PSH at New Hope Carver Creek. There is a current search for sites for expansion of PSH for members of the community.

Residents who have experienced long-term homelessness and are coping with a disabling condition can choose between community-based housing options with more than 30 community partners or one of two supportive housing communities. Each year, nearly 90 people can access stable housing and are connected with supportive services that meet their goals and needs.

PSH can counter the housing barriers created by stigmas of incarceration, disability, and homelessness by designing housing and programs that encourage longer stable housing. I'm a proponent of re-entry PSH and have supported the transition to stable housing to encourage long-term stability and reduced recidivism. The population of justice-involved residents is supported by the Criminal Justice Resource Center and other community organizations.

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?

In partnership with the State of North Carolina, the county enters into agreements with new businesses to hire local workers. In return, new businesses are offered tax breaks. In reality, the agreements should provide tax breaks only after the threshold of local hires has been met. I support revising such agreements to include performance metrics before the award of tax incentives.

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

DCo Thrives, a pilot program in its start-up phase, will provide guaranteed income to low-income families with children. This is an exciting, progressive experiment to lift families out of poverty. I plan to lobby for added resources to participants to ensure financial and housing stability during and after the pilot program. DCo Thrives is a county-administered program funded for two years by the federal government with American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds.

As the People's Alliance is a trusted community partner, I'd be honored to learn more about the non-traditional programs supported by the PA membership.

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

Durham lacks fundamental components of public transit to support all residents. Insufficient bus service, deteriorating or lack of sidewalks, and a lack of regional transit makes public transit planning and funding a priority for a healthy community. I would support access to affordable public transit in each neighborhood, across Durham, and to major employment or health centers in RTP and the Triangle. I support an extension of service, enhanced frequency of routes, and bus-only lanes. I also support safer sidewalks, bicycling infrastructure, and ADA-compliant bus stops.

I support continuous community input to ensure this billion-dollar investment funded by the half-cent sales tax is responsive to residents who need it most.

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

The Board Commissioners have created programs to provide property tax relief to long-term low-income residents. In August 2023, the county introduced the Low-Income Homeowners Relief Program for homeowners who have an income less than or equal to 80% of the Average Median Income and lived in their home for five years or longer.

Local governments' hands are tied by state law in how we address the burden of property taxes which is why Durham's program is a grant and not a change in tax rates for the individuals that apply for the Low Income Homeowners Tax Credit. We are working with our staff to expand the number of residents that take advantage of this program. I would support the idea of staff who can help navigate the current application so that those who are digitally disconnected or have literacy and language access needs can also engage in this relief program.

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 provides funding for staff salaries and the operation of the jail. The county sheriff operates the jail, which is governed by state and federal guidelines. Although we don't have the authority at the Board of Commissioners to dictate what happens in the Durham jail, I appreciate that the Board of Commissioners holds the ability to make resolutions and inquiries about conditions that require a public response in the event that deaths and injuries occur in a manner that may be seen as questionable or break the public trust.

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'd prioritize the city's program expansion based on data - from where and at which times of day are calls for HEART received. Choosing a priority among the three factors would be challenging until I get a chance to more deeply review the data. I have a personal tie to this issue as I've lost a child under circumstances where he would have been better served by having a HEART program available. That being said, my discussions with HEART staff and law enforcement does not show resistance to the program.

A collaborative approach to public safety should involve law enforcement.

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?

The current child welfare system punishes poverty. The county must create a budget that invests in the things parents need for their economic and social well-being to create a healthy environment in which to raise children.

- pay increase and bonus
- Universal Basic Income
- CJRC investments
- COVID-19 impacts on this particular labor force

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?

Involuntary separations are tragic and I will always meet with constituents that need to share how they are experiencing the systems in Durham County. I dream of a day where the foster system has no clients. The truth is that our current needs for confidentiality of certain proceedings are meant to protect the child and to encourage families who take care of these children to participate in supportive resources that can lead to reunification of the family. If the worst days of a family were to be made public for anyone to read, I fear that fewer families would willingly participate or trust in our services. I fear that fewer families will engage programs meant to help them and that this may lead to lower rates of reunification and that ultimately hurts children. I want members of the Durham Community to also be aware that courtroom policies are mandated by the state with possible discretion by judges and that the Board of Commission does not hold jurisdiction over these courtrooms. Nevertheless, I would invite judges to sit with families who are expressing concern so that everyone can better understand one another. I am happy to coordinate such discussion so that everyone can learn from one another about how the decisions and systems are impacting families and so that families can hopefully better understand how and why decisions are being made. Families in many cases can appeal the decisions being made by our local judges in the NC Court of Appeals.

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

I think some of the top issues facing the Latinx and immigrant community are economic development, safety, wellness, and language access. Durham County recently became a member of the Welcoming Network and was awarded a grant to begin formally engaging with members of the immigrant and Latinx communities. The county wishes to provide engagement opportunities to hear from the community members about their principal issues and not assume the issues. Durham County staff has begun to engage the Latinx business community to implement strategies that connect local Latinx businesses with contracting opportunities within the County. Additionally, Durham County included in the budget a position for a refugee coordinator to increase communication with the immigrant and refugee community and expand available translation languages to reach more non-native speakers. I was also happy to support ARPA funds going to organizations that support the wellness needs of the Latinx and immigrant communities such as El Futuro, World Relief, Refugee Community Foundation, the Center for Child and Family Health and others.

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?

The Durham County Board of Commissioners unanimously adopted a non-discrimination ordinance in November 2021 that protects county residents from discrimination based on gender identity, sexual orientation, natural hairstyle, disability, and more.

Additionally, in February 2023, the Board of Commissioners unanimously passed a resolution that expresses support for students' privacy and condemns two pieces of legislation in the North

Carolina General Assembly, SB49 “Parents’ Bill of Rights” and HB43 that would restrict gender-affirming treatment for minors.

As a member of the Board of Commissioners, I have been committed and happy to lend my vote to securing rights and protections for the LGBTQ community to ensure Durham is a safe and inclusive place for all - despite what is happening in Raleigh.