

## **PA PAC Questionnaire for Durham City Council Ward Seats and Durham Mayor – 2025**

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 Monday July 28 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 Board at

[pac@peoplesalliancepac.org](mailto:pac@peoplesalliancepac.org) by **July 28 at 5pm**

***Please use subject line ‘PA ENDORSEMENT 2025’***

Please note that following the Monday July 28 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. ***Please use subject line ‘PA ENDORSEMENT 2025’ when emailing your completed questionnaire to***

[pac@peoplesalliancepac.org](mailto:pac@peoplesalliancepac.org)

Candidate’s name: Leonardo “Leo” Williams

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1. What is your vision for the Durham community, and what are the specific policies you would prioritize during your term to move us towards that vision?

My vision is to build a Durham where everyone feels at home, where abundance is shared, belonging is real, and progress doesn't come at the cost of our people. We are the cultural heartbeat of the South, and we deserve policy that matches our promise.

To move toward this vision, I will prioritize:

- Affordable housing and anti-displacement efforts, leveraging our AAA bond rating and empowering nonprofits and housing authorities to build and preserve affordable homes.
- HEART program expansion, in partnership with Durham County, to make mental health and crisis response care more accessible.
- Economic justice initiatives like expanding guaranteed basic income and strengthening food security.
- Climate resilience by funding green infrastructure, modernizing stormwater systems, and ensuring vulnerable neighborhoods aren't left behind.
- Civic education and transparency to help residents understand how local government works, what we've already accomplished, and how to shape what comes next.

2. Why are you the right person to elect at this moment to guide our city over the coming years?

I'm the right person because I bring the relationships, experience, and vision needed right now. I've delivered resources from D.C. back to Durham, built trust across sectors, and led with transparency. As an educator and small business owner, I understand everyday struggles, and as your current mayor, I've built coalitions and taken bold action.

At a time when vulnerable communities are under attack from our federal government and preemption efforts from Raleigh threaten our ability to govern locally, Durham needs a mayor who can operate across city, county, state, and federal lines. I have those relationships, and I'm using them to fight for Durham. Whether it's securing funding, pushing back against harmful policies, or protecting our values, I have the access and the courage to stand up for our city. Now more than ever, Durham needs steady leadership that's connected, strategic, and unafraid.

3. In your view, how do interactions among council members influence the larger health of

Durham's policy and political environment? As a council member, how would you seek to contribute to the council's culture? If you are running for mayor, how would your leadership influence the council's culture?

Council culture is city culture. When we engage each other with civility, listen across differences, and stay focused on outcomes, we model how Durham can work together even when we disagree. As mayor, I lead by example. I facilitate collaboration, stay solution-oriented, and center our collective purpose: to make Durham better for everyone.

The very existence of the Durham City Council is truly the representation and embodiment of Durham itself. This alone should remove any selfish act of any elected official and instead elevate our duty to embrace our diverse opinions and values as we collectively evolve our community to be better today than it was yesterday. Interactions among council members and the mayor are a sacred act of democracy, the level of governance closest to the people, and it must be treated with respect and responsibility.

The mayor sets the tone. And leadership matters. Since I've taken office, here's what that tone has produced:

- We passed the city budget in under an hour in both years of my tenure – different from previous 6+ hour standoffs.
- All council members feel respected, heard, and empowered to lead.
- Council members spend more time in City Hall and out in the community.
- We've increased policy-focused collaboration among members, leading to more progressive legislation that reflects the will of Durham residents.
- Council members are now routinely called upon to represent the entire council on key matters – a shift I've championed.
- Passionate, values-driven debate is encouraged. Disagreement doesn't mean disconnection.

This is the Durham approach to governance: inclusive, principled, and people-focused. I will continue to set that standard.

4. Building and approving an annual budget for our community is one of the most important acts of governance that city council members undertake each year. If you currently serve on the City Council, what informed your approach to the budget process and your ultimate decision to vote for it? If you are not currently on council, how would you have voted on the budget and what would have informed your approach and decision?

As Mayor, I approached the budget with an eye toward equity, responsibility, and sustainability. We passed the largest city budget in Durham's history, and we did so

efficiently and collaboratively with each council member able to contribute and advocate for items for their constituents.

This year, I took a more conservative fiscal approach, especially in light of the uncertain impacts of new land valuations. I was deeply concerned about raising taxes on our retired community, people who own their homes but live on fixed incomes and cannot simply re-enter the workforce. That concern grounded my decisions throughout the process.

I appreciated the new “prioritization” method we used to shape the budget. It helped ensure that investments were aligned with urgent needs, not just political priorities. The final budget:

- Addressed key infrastructure concerns
- Increased pay for city staff
- Expanded the HEART program
- Preserved fare-free transit access, and more

There were some areas, particularly in economic development, where I would have liked to see additional investment. However, I believe compromise is a form of leadership. We must not fund initiatives that lack the internal capacity or readiness to deploy those resources effectively. Our economic development infrastructure still needs reform, and I support taking the time to ensure systems are in place before allocating major funds or launching new policies.

At the end of the day, budgets are moral documents, and this one reflects our values of shared abundance, resilience, and collective progress.

5. From smoky skies to extreme heat to heavy rainfall events, Durham is already experiencing the effects of climate change – and the most vulnerable people in our communities (including children, the elderly, low-income residents, unhoused residents, and BIPOC folks) are being impacted the most. What policies will you prioritize to reduce climate pollution and help Durham adapt to worsening impacts?

Climate change is not a future threat. It’s our current reality. We’ve already taken steps by budgeting for stormwater improvements and integrating green infrastructure into our Capital Improvement Plans. But we must go further, faster.

I will prioritize:

- Targeted resilience investments in climate-vulnerable neighborhoods often left out of the headlines.
- Requiring energy-efficient, storm-resilient design in all new development.

- Upgrading outdated infrastructure to handle more frequent and intense weather events.
- Educating the public about how climate justice intersects with racial, housing, and economic equity.

Adaptation to a more aggressive climate is only part of our resilience and action plans. Like our parks, leadership today must learn from the mistakes of our past while also mitigating current climate crises and challenges. That means not just reacting to storms, but anticipating and designing for the next 10-20 years.

Durham can and should lead the South on equitable, science-driven, people-centered climate action.

6. Would you be willing to vote for a city contribution to partially fund an expansion of the HEART program into Durham Public Schools? More broadly, how is Durham doing in its approach to community safety, and what if anything would you change?

Yes, I would absolutely support HEART expansion into Durham Public Schools. Community safety is about care, prevention, and trust. We've expanded HEART across the city, added 17 new staff members, and invested in violence interruption and restorative justice. Still, we must do more to ensure people feel and are safe. The Durham Approach to Engagement (DAE) emphasizes community partnership over enforcement. We can fund both prevention and accountability. It's not either/or.

7. How does equity – including racial equity and equitable services for immigrants and refugees – play into your view of governance? What metrics or indicators would you look to to know whether Durham is achieving more equitable outcomes for underserved populations over time? What do you see as the main policy levers that City Council can use to impact those indicators?

Equity is not a checkbox. It's a lens that must shape every decision we make. For me, that includes racial equity, economic justice, and equitable access to services for immigrants, refugees, and historically underserved populations.

We've already made progress: raising the city's minimum livable wage, supporting the DEAR (Durham Expunction and Restoration) and Eviction Diversion programs, and keeping buses fare-free to reduce transportation barriers. But we need more.

We work together with our county and community organizations to holistically track:

- Rates of displacement, eviction, and housing cost burden

- Wage disparities and access to employment
- Access to green space, transit, and city services across zip codes
- Language access and participation in civic processes by underrepresented communities

City Council's levers include targeted investment, zoning decisions, procurement policy, public-private partnerships, and meeting community members where they are to center their voice in our planning.

Equity is about outcomes, not just intent. But equity also requires ongoing engagement, not just metrics, but stories told through ALL of our neighbors.

8. What is the most important thing that is not currently being funded by the City? Would you be willing to raise taxes to fund this item?

We need to invest more deeply in our young people. I'm advocating for a vision of "Aftercare for All" where every young person in Durham has access to safe, enriching environments after school. That includes expanded hours at Parks & Rec facilities, internships and job programs for teens, and meaningful pathways to economic mobility.

We've already launched efforts like the Bull City Future Fund and are planning 5,000 summer youth jobs. But to scale these efforts and make them sustainable, we need more funding.

If we've exhausted other revenue options, explored grants and partnerships, and still can't meet the need, then yes, I would support a carefully crafted tax increase to fund these essential investments in our future. But it would be done with transparency and accountability.

9. Are you satisfied with the Durham Police Department, including its administrative, law enforcement, and security functions? Should the City government increase or decrease resources allocated to the Police Department? Please explain your answer.

Public safety is a basic promise we make to every resident. We cannot afford to oversimplify it. While the traditional model of policing cannot be our only tool, it is still a tool we need, especially as we transition toward a more holistic approach to safety.

I believe in a both/and model. We must fund the Durham Police Department sufficiently to ensure core public safety functions while also growing alternatives like HEART and restorative justice.

Under my leadership, we've added to HEART, expanded youth prevention programs, and sustained fare-free transit to address root causes of crime. I've also supported investments in law enforcement that reflect modernized expectations, cultural competency, and data-driven deployment. As a result of this comprehensive public safety apparatus, crime is down 26% in Durham.

The question we should ask isn't "more or less policing?" It's: What combination of services will truly keep Durham safe and thriving? That's what I'm committed to.

10. Please detail your plan for affordable housing in Durham, including a discussion of current programs here in Durham and other programs across the state that have been effective in maintaining and creating affordability.

Housing is a fundamental need, and in a growing city like Durham, we are working to ensure that development doesn't push people out. My approach to affordable housing is comprehensive: focused on both increasing supply, preserving affordability for those already here, and affordable living (not just housing) in Durham.

What we've done so far:

- Passed SCAD reforms allowing churches to build affordable housing on their land.
- Supported nonprofits and the Durham Housing Authority in acquiring and developing land for income-restricted housing.
- Protected our tree canopy and addressed erosion while increasing housing supply.

What I'm advocating for next: A model for growth – housing those in Durham and those who are coming to Durham by increasing supply, calming tax burdens, stabilizing aging residents, and expanding capacity for college and student housing.

- Expanding Naturally Occurring Affordable Housing (NOAH) through acquisition and preservation.
- Supporting Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs) to provide affordable options for multi-generational families or renters.
- Exploring social housing models with shared common spaces.
- Leveraging our AAA bond rating to partner with mission-driven developers.
- Bolstering mixed income housing options with Durham Housing Authority.
- Preserving existing housing.
- Negotiating affordable housing allocations with new construction.

Durham's strength is its people, and that includes our seniors, longtime residents, working families, and students. Housing them must remain a top priority, not just

through construction, but through smart, inclusive planning.

11. Describe your decision making process in voting to approve or not approve zoning requests. In particular, what do you look for in a development plan that leads you to vote for it or against it? In your answer, please take into consideration state restrictions on the power of cities to regulate development.

Zoning decisions are among the most powerful tools we have to shape Durham's future, but they must be approached with humility, equity, and legal awareness. Under state law, our powers are limited, but we still have influence.

When reviewing a zoning request, I ask:

- Does it support or undermine our affordable housing goals?
- What are the displacement risks for nearby residents?
- Can current infrastructure handle the additional demand? Will a developer be able to support infrastructure in their agreement?
- Are there legal workarounds like add-ons to development agreements or incentive structures that we can negotiate?
- How does it align with our Comprehensive Plan and Strategic Plan?
- What are the climate and environmental implications? Can we mitigate these implications with our current policies and infrastructure?

We can negotiate for better outcomes using development agreements, community benefits, and targeted incentives. I look for projects that show good faith effort in community engagement, affordability, the most benefit to our residents, and long-term alignment with Durham's values.

12. Please provide your analysis of Durham's municipal bonds over the past few years.

Durham's AAA bond rating is a testament to our strong fiscal management, and it's one of our most powerful tools for investment.

We've used municipal bonds strategically to:

- Upgrade water and sewer infrastructure, including the Jordan Lake Water Treatment Plant.
- Fund over \$25 million in stormwater improvements and flood reduction, including the South Ellerbe Restoration project.
- Add \$7 million for lead soil cleanup at five parks.



- Invest in transportation, sidewalks, and safe street upgrades through the Connect Durham bond.
- Build major public assets like the upcoming aquatic center at Merrick-Moore Park.

These aren't just construction projects. They're foundations for equity, resilience, and growth. Going forward, I will continue to champion smart bond usage that delivers long-term return on investment for all Durham residents.

13. Many vulnerable populations in our city are under attack from both the federal government and the state legislature. This includes LGBTQ+ people and immigrants, among others. What role can the city play in countering these attacks?

Durham must be a shield for its people, especially those most at risk of being targeted by this administration and state legislature.

That means:

- Upholding non-cooperation policies with ICE and ensuring all residents can access services without fear while also partnering with organizations on the ground to provide support to ALL of our residents.
- Ensuring language access, cultural competency, and inclusive outreach in our city operations and services.
- Partnering with LGBTQ+, disability, and immigrant organizations to promote safety, healthcare, and civil rights.
- Advocating at the state and federal level, while organizing regionally to protect home rule.

We've already shown we can stand firm on our values while navigating preemption and political pressure. I will continue using every tool available from policy, platform, to partnerships to ensure Durham remains a safe, inclusive place for all.

14. Please describe your understanding of the role of state and federal preemption on local government. Are there any parts of your platform that might run up against preemptions? If so, please explain how you would overcome such obstacles.

State and federal preemption are real and growing challenges for local governments, especially those in progressive cities like Durham. In many cases, we're prohibited from enacting policies that reflect the will of our residents simply because higher-level lawmakers seek to impose ideological limits.

We've run up against this with rent control, some policing reform measures, and

certain housing regulations. But that doesn't mean we're powerless.

My approach is to be strategic:

- Build cross-jurisdictional coalitions with other municipalities facing similar constraints. I have built many relationships with other municipalities across the country to build on our coalitions and form best practices in our approaches to these limitations from
  - Educational campaigns that help residents differentiate Dillon rule vs. Home rule states
  - Urging our state and federal leaders to continue applying pressure for local powers to better reflect the needs of our community.
- Use legal workarounds like development agreements or incentive structures.
- Leverage my relationships at every level, local, state, and federal, to protect Durham's autonomy.

Where we can't legislate, we can often organize, educate, innovate, and build creative policies.

15. What guides your decision making process when presented with contradictory views? For example, when advice from city staff contradicts advice from advisory committees (such as the Planning Commission and others), and residents present multiple and conflicting opinions, how do you reach your decisions on how to vote?

Good governance isn't about pleasing everyone. We must be a body that listens to ALL residents.

When I'm presented with conflicting opinions, I ask:

- What is the benefit to most people with the least amount of burden to our residents?
- Who will be most impacted, and have they been meaningfully heard? Am I also listening and considering the lived experiences of our residents who can't show up at City Hall?
- Which path aligns with our values and strategic goals?

I respect the expertise of city staff and the lived experience of residents equally. My role is to weigh it all, apply judgment, and explain my decisions transparently, even when not everyone agrees. That's the best I can do in ensuring our decisions are balanced and our outcomes can benefit the most people in our city.

16. How can the city engage with Durham Public Schools and work toward implementing an "Aftercare for All" program that could benefit all DPS families?

An "Aftercare for All" model is about safety, enrichment, and equity. It aligns with a holistic approach in supporting our young people and community.

The City can:

- Provide funding and space through Parks and Recreation facilities.
- Coordinate with Durham Public Schools to align scheduling and transportation.
- Launch a Youth Economic Council to advise on program design.

We've already proposed 5,000 summer jobs for youth and are expanding after-school activities citywide. With the right partnerships, we can make aftercare universal and a transformative way to engage our youth in the city.

17. What steps would you take to create and improve ways for children to be able to walk or bike to schools?

Creating safe, walkable, and bikeable routes to school isn't just about infrastructure, it's about working together in partnership to create opportunities for this to happen. I've listened to residents and worked with them and our staff to take action.

My plan includes:

- Continuing to align these efforts with Vision Zero, our city's commitment to eliminating traffic fatalities.
- Responding quickly to resident feedback, which allows our staff to act swiftly and effectively where safety concerns arise.
  - I've worked with local and state partners to install traffic lights near busy highways and schools, based on community requests and needs.
  - We installed more lighting infrastructure, especially in areas where community members have reported being robbed or feeling unsafe.
  - We've built raised crosswalks and enhanced traffic calming in school zones.
  - We're currently partnering with aging populations to assess and implement pedestrian safety improvements, ensuring our infrastructure works for all ages.
- Using development agreements to advocate for infrastructure add-ons, including sidewalks, crosswalks, and bike lanes, that are directly impacted by new developments.
- Continuing to include Durham Public Schools (DPS) in our Joint City-County planning meetings to ensure a holistic approach to school safety and infrastructure, informed by real data on school zones, bus routes, and stops.

*Thank you for completing this questionnaire.*

*Please do not forget to provide us with your resume or biographical statement, as well as a high resolution headshot.*