

**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 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

Candidate’s name: Matt Kopac _____

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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?

I'm running for City Council Ward 1 because I believe in fighting for a livable Durham for all through empathy, collaboration, and smart policies. Together, we can ease pressures displacing marginalized neighbors, strengthen our local economy, ensure a healthy, resilient environment, and keep our community safe.

For affordability, my priorities are fighting displacement through home repair and eviction diversion programs; expanding affordable housing via public-private partnerships such as with affordable housing developers and improving development codes; promoting economic mobility with workforce development and guaranteed income initiatives; and maintaining and expanding free and accessible transportation – including buses, walking, and biking infrastructure.

To support a strong local economy, I'll champion sustainable growth by backing small local businesses, preserving Durham's arts and cultural heritage, supporting recreation, fostering local housing development, encouraging public commercial projects in underserved neighborhoods, and creating green jobs through waste reduction and reuse.

For a healthy, resilient environment, I'll advance green infrastructure to address flooding, expand the urban tree canopy and green spaces in heat-vulnerable neighborhoods, use land use reforms to protect natural ecosystems, accelerate renewable energy and energy efficiency per our carbon neutrality goals, and safeguard sensitive environmental areas from encroaching development and sprawl.

On safety, I will address the root causes of violence – including economic and housing insecurity and racial injustice – expand the HEART program's compassionate alternatives in non-violent situations, implement Vision Zero for safer streets and better protections for pedestrians and cyclists, and work to ensure Durham welcomes and protects our immigrant and LGBTQ+ neighbors.

This vision brings a holistic approach to building a stronger, more just Durham for everyone.

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

I believe I am the right person to guide our city because I am experienced, collaborative, and deeply justice minded.

With more than seven years on boards and commissions and fifteen years in progressive policy and organizing across Durham, I have built strong relationships and have shown a commitment to listening, learning, and showing up for this community. As a sustainability professional, my job is to engage a wide range of stakeholders, evaluate data, weigh trade-offs, and help organizations achieve goals on climate, waste, human rights, and safer products. I also bring a background in affordable housing and community development policy,

plus Planning Commission experience – allowing me to contribute immediately on Durham’s toughest challenges.

My leadership style is collaborative and inclusive. I actively seek out diverse perspectives, build strong teams, and put people and solutions at the center. A good example is my time as chair of the Durham Environmental Affairs Board: there, I helped diversify our membership, shaped a new strategy focused on environmental justice, and supported board members in pursuing their passions. I don’t seek credit for myself, and my goal isn’t for my idea to win – it’s for the team to win. And in this case, the team is the council and all of Durham.

Justice drives my work. Raised with this value and shaped by life experience – as a Peace Corps Volunteer, affordable housing advocate, workers' rights legal volunteer, advocate and supporter of waste-pickers' unions in India and West Africa, champion for small farmers in the developing world, and environmental justice philanthropist – I want to bring this passion for justice to serve Durham and to bring our community together so everyone can thrive.

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?

Leadership matters – interactions among council members and within our community set the tone for Durham’s policy and politics. We need passionate debate, but also more grace in our local politics. While the council won’t always agree, we must commit to operating as a team for the good of the community.

This job is hard, largely thankless, and done in the most public of spotlights. Our officials, staff, and residents are all people deserving dignity and respect. Elected leaders shape our political culture through the narratives we choose to lift up and by how we show up.

Collaboration moves at the speed of trust, built through consistency, integrity, and care. I have a track record of building trust and strong teams and would bring that to the council. I fight hard for what I believe in but always look for the good in others.

As a councilmember, I would:

- Assume positive intent and approach people with empathy
- Listen, and seek to understand before being understood
- Speak and act with care

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?

If I had been on council, I would have voted for the FY2025-2026 budget. There is always more we can ask for, but we must make choices and be mindful of the tax burden we place on residents. Some of the budget items that stood out to me are that the city maintained free bus fare, made critical investments in infrastructure, expanded the HEART program, and raised pay for city workers. I have experience with budgeting, and had I gone through the process, I would have listened to staff, council colleagues, and community stakeholders, closely evaluated all program options, attempted to prioritize and weight key programs based on our strategic plan and community input, run scenarios for different funding levels for priority programs, and made the best decision I could based on the final proposal, made up of the recommendations of staff and all seven members of the council.

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 an urgent reality for Durham, with extreme heat and flooding disproportionately harming marginalized communities, as detailed in the 2019 Triangle Regional Resilience Assessment. My commitment is to prioritize climate justice – ensuring our most impacted neighbors help design adaptation and resilience efforts – and to integrate climate action into budgeting, land use planning, and economic development.

First, I will focus on decarbonizing city operations and advocate for accelerating Durham's Carbon Neutrality and Renewable Energy Plan, which I helped champion. This plan calls for reduced energy use in city buildings, 80% renewable energy for city operations by 2030, and full carbon neutrality by 2050. I'll push for deeper building retrofits and expanded renewable power investments.

Second, protecting residents from flooding and heat is critical. Durham's ongoing community resilience planning shows 20% of our population ranks among the most vulnerable nationally. I will promote stormwater infrastructure and nature-based solutions like native trees and green spaces in urban heat islands. I also want to explore more cooling centers beyond libraries as part of resilience efforts.

Transit will be a vital lever for reducing car-centric pollution fueling climate change.

Land use reform is perhaps Durham's biggest climate tool. The Unified Development Ordinance rewrite offers a chance to build on the Comprehensive Plan by integrating climate-forward strategies to curb sprawl, protect natural areas, and promote walkable, mixed-use, transit-friendly neighborhoods with equitable access to parks, shade, and clean air.

Finally, I'll collaborate with the Office of Economic Development, Durham Tech, and others to embed climate strategies into economic planning – decarbonizing infrastructure while creating local green jobs that boost economic mobility for youth and working residents.

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?

As a parent of Durham Public School children, I support expanding HEART into our schools. Police have been called on kindergarteners and first graders for things like a threatening remark or accidentally bringing a pocket-knife to my kids' school. This kind of police response is disproportionate and only increases anxiety among the kids and parents. For most issues with young children, HEART would be the better response, and I'd be open to the city helping make this happen.

More broadly, I'm encouraged by HEART's expansion – including 17 added positions in the Community Safety Department and progress toward 24/7 service in the 2025-2026 budget. Achieving full HEART operation will help police focus on gun violence and the serious violent crime that persists in Durham. These are pressing issues, and we must stay focused on tackling violent and organized crime.

I also support efforts to divert people with mental illness, youth, and non-violent offenders from the criminal justice system. The United States incarcerates an unjust percentage of our population, and this approach is both racially inequitable and unsustainable.

Alongside these short-term interventions, Durham must address root causes and pursue longer-term solutions like tackling housing and economic insecurity.

Lastly, I'm excited about increased support for Vision Zero, since safer streets are a key part of community safety. We need more traffic calming, more two-way street conversions, and greater access to protected walking and biking options. See question 17 for more details.

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?

Racial equity and equitable services for immigrants, refugees, and working people are central to my view of governance. Equity should not only be a primary objective of local government – it is a core value here in Durham. Yet despite Durham's history of civil rights advocacy and progressive leadership, inequities rooted in systemic racism and xenophobia persist across our community.

Many metrics can help measure and address these inequities. Since Durham's Office of Equity and Inclusion prioritizes workforce, contracting and procurement, it makes sense to have metrics like wage levels, minority contracting, and downtown workers benefiting from the city's parking program deserve focus.

Gentrification and displacement are big concerns, and housing remains a critical need for Durham, so I would look at data on the displacement of lower-wealth and Black and Brown residents as we work to turn the tide, along with the percentage of our population who are housing burdened or unhoused.

Because I'm passionate about sustainable growth and climate resilience, I would also consider the Trust for Public Land's ParkScore, which measures the share of residents living within a half-mile walk of a park.

Finally, regarding services for immigrants and refugees, we should promote and track expanded language access across city departments and the translation of the Unified Development Ordinance.

It's vital to continue embedding an equity lens across departments, using levers like the budget, capital improvement plans, zoning, and economic development planning to implement change.

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?

The city has many great goals, so my budget priorities – affordability, a stronger local economy, fair wages and benefits for city workers, HEART, and climate – are about scaling up and bringing new thinking to meet our challenges. I want to see Durham increase support for revolving loan funds to build more affordable and missing middle housing, and considering Tropical Storm Chantal and the recent heat wave, I believe particular attention is needed on climate safety and resilience. I would consider raising taxes for programs that reflect Durham's values, but I'd rather grow and diversify our tax base, and make more good things happen within existing resources where possible.

I also think the city should invest more in process improvement and communications to help residents access benefits and build what we want more of. As James Clear writes in *Atomic Habits*: "You do not rise to the level of your goals. You fall to the level of your systems." The Durham Expunction and Restoration (DEAR) program is a great example – it helped low-income and justice-involved residents get jobs and housing by removing barriers like complicated expungement and license restoration processes. The city should use this model for other challenges too, like making it easier for downtown workers to access parking benefits or helping residents claim the earned income tax credit and Low-Income Homeowner Relief. According to the Durham Benefits Access Coalition, residents could be missing out on \$80M in benefits each year. This approach should also be used to help make progress on housing, trails, and safer streets.

Finally, to identify new solutions, I'd like the city to host innovative public forums with skilled facilitators that bring together staff, residents, and partners to map out processes, pinpoint barriers, and weigh the real costs and benefits of removing them.

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.

While reforms are needed and my heart is with expanding the HEART program, there are reasons to commend Chief Andrews and the Durham Police Department. Listening to residents most impacted by violence reveals a complicated, nuanced picture. Some feel safer with a police presence, while others emphasize accountability, reform, and alternatives.

We've already lost more than 15 lives to gun violence this year (as of the end of May), and organized crime continues to disrupt residents' lives. Though irresponsible and dangerous national and state-level gun policies limit what the city can do, we must still act where we can.

Expanding HEART should ease pressure and allow police to focus on situations requiring armed response (see question 6 for more on HEART). Both past and current police chiefs have been strong partners in supporting this expansion. Additionally, the police chief has championed reforms such as the written consent-to-search policy and increasing Crisis Intervention training for officers.

Slow 911 response times are a major concern that must be addressed, requiring increased resources – whether through the police department or HEART. We must ensure people receive the support they request promptly.

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.

Durham needs a comprehensive affordability strategy. We must keep people in their homes, build more affordable housing, promote locally responsive missing middle housing, and expand transit, bike, and pedestrian infrastructure.

Keeping people in their homes is a top priority. We can do this by continuing to fund eviction diversion, legal aid, repairs, and energy-efficiency improvements. But these alone aren't sustainable, long-term interventions. We need more deeply affordable housing and pathways to economic mobility (like the Bulls Initiative) so more people can afford to stay. Building on Forever Home Durham, we must do more with public land and public-private partnerships – like getting a deal done for the former police station – and keep supporting non-profit developer partner organizations. While negotiating long-term income-restricted units through rezonings is important, this is a tactic, not a strategy.

Even if we do all this, local housing needs won't be met, and home costs and rents will keep rising due to new people moving here. Focusing only on building or negotiating affordable housing leaves us at the mercy of what the private market builds, driven by outside capital and zoning.

What we need is locally responsive, small-scale development – not more luxury high-rises. We should take charge, decide what affordable and missing middle housing we want, make it easier to permit and build, train locals to develop it, and expand the Durham Affordable Housing Loan Fund and the pilot fund for affordable ADUs with community development finance partners. By building more of the homes we want in Durham, we can ease displacement pressures in low-income and marginalized neighborhoods over time.

The final piece is transit: Bus Rapid Transit, continued free bus service, and bike and pedestrian infrastructure – which I address more in question #17.

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.

As a member of the Planning Commission, I have had the opportunity to consider and vote on more than 50 rezoning requests. I have visited every site I have reviewed, talked with scores of residents to understand their concerns, and thoughtfully weighed difficult cases.

My decision-making process starts with the Comprehensive Plan. This is sometimes easier said than done as each case typically has between 30-40 relevant policies, so there are always some tensions and trade-offs to consider.

Some of the factors that together make me more likely to approve a rezoning request are:

- A commitment to the provision of long-term affordable housing
- Developments that provide more homes closer-in to urban areas with connectivity and amenities
- Mixed-use developments with proximity to amenities like grocery stores, parks, schools, and transit stops
- Projects with commitments beyond UDO requirements on tree preservation/canopy and open spaces
- Community engagement with deep listening by the developer

Some of the factors that lead me to consider voting against rezoning requests are:

- Larger-scale development without a respectable level of long-term affordable housing
- Encroachment on environmentally sensitive land like wildlife corridors and wetlands
- Development that falls outside the urban growth boundary
- Development that promotes car-centric single-family sprawl
- A lack of sufficient infrastructure (e.g., road and school capacity) to accommodate the new development
- A lack of serious community engagement by the developer

In all cases, I thoughtfully consider the impact of potential displacement based on the income and racial make-up of communities where development is proposed.

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

I supported the passage of the three municipal bonds passed over the past few years.

The two most recent— the 2024 \$115M Streets and Sidewalks Bond and the \$85M Parks and Recreation Bond— address critical needs for streets and green infrastructure like sidewalks and parks. Durham's 2017 Bike+Walk Plan identified over 420 miles of needed sidewalks, so adding 12.4 miles on top of the roughly 2.5 miles built per year feels like a drop in the bucket, but we have to find reasonable ways to make progress. Also, given Durham's Trust for Public Land ParkScore is below the national urban average, focusing on equitable park distribution and maintenance was necessary and meaningful.

The 2019 \$95M Affordable Housing Bond launched the Forever Home program, a significant achievement for Durham. It is helping provide new affordable housing, preserving rentals, creating first-time homebuyer opportunities, transitioning unhoused residents to permanent housing, and stabilizing low-income renters and homeowners. And after decades of federal disinvestment, this bond showed our values by using local tax dollars to redevelop public housing and tackle affordability.

When proposing bonds or new spending, we must be mindful of the tax burden on low- and fixed-income residents. Durham has overwhelmingly supported these bonds and tax increases, like in the 2025-2026 budget. To do more good things, we need to grow and diversify our tax base, expand property tax relief programs like Low Income Homeowner Relief, and address research showing property revaluations tend to overtax lower-value homes while under-taxing higher-value ones.

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

I am proud of how inclusive Durham is, including to LGBTQI people, immigrants, our Black residents, and others. It has been sickening to see the federal government attack our family members, friends and neighbors, layering on pain they have already faced from our NC state legislature, and historically. It is an affront to the values of this community to see the attacks on diversity, to see people's rights taken away, and to witness people being stolen away. The city's primary role is to protect our residents, so while our municipal tools may be limited, we must act wherever we can. It starts by using our platform to speak out, show up, and advocate in Durham and alongside our Durham legislative delegation in Raleigh and Washington, DC. It continues by using our budget and other city resources to support great community organizations at the front lines of protecting vulnerable residents and helping them feel welcome and thrive in Durham. And we must work with the city manager and attorney to identify other means at our disposal to confront these attacks.

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.

While we must always strive to be ambitious, it is important to communicate responsibly about what we can control as a municipal government in North Carolina. I am not well-versed on federal preemption, but I am acquainted with state preemption through my direct advocacy on living wages in Durham, and through my service on the Environmental Affairs Board on topics like fees for non-reusable bags.

Due to Republican control of our legislature and state supreme court, we operate very closely to a Dillon Rule state, meaning Durham has very little latitude to do what the state has not expressly granted in statute. As a result, I have tried not to argue for policies that I know are preempted. I will remain curious and creative to identify what we can do with the authority we have.

I will consult with our city attorney and study models of other communities in NC to see where there might be opportunities. It is particularly interesting that Chapel Hill has a mandatory inclusionary zoning ordinance that applies to for-sale units, which was upheld by the NC Court of Appeals in 2024, though it exists in a legal grey area.

There is a longer-term play here, where we need to be fighting to take back the legislature and the state supreme court to give cities like Durham more local independence, but we can't advocate for policies in 2025 based on this future work.

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?

When presented with contradictory views, I start by giving due respect and consideration to all perspectives and assume positive intent. I know that people are coming in with their own life experiences, professional expertise, and priorities. It is helpful to receive a diverse range of perspectives to better understand the dimensions of an issue, and I value the input of staff, colleagues, community partners, and community advocates.

When trying to weigh competing priorities and get to a decision, I take the following steps:

- I do my homework. I evaluate all available information including existing city strategies and plans, and I talk with relevant stakeholders.
- I look for evidence that supports or challenges the perspectives I'm hearing and evaluate what I believe will be the likely outcome of the decision based on the data.
- I assess and try to prioritize whoever is most impacted by the decision, while also evaluating the broader community benefits.
- I try to dig deeper into interests versus just the positions that are communicated, and root decisions in shared Durham values like equity and justice.

Once I make a decision, I try to communicate it clearly and transparently, so my rationale is clear.

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?

I love the idea in principle, though this is the first time I have heard of it. I would need to learn more and assess all priorities (including the proposed expansion of HEART into DPS), particularly given the budgetary environment is going to get more difficult due to attacks from the federal and state level. I would also like to learn more about this proposal in the context of a broader review of childcare needs in Durham and how we can meet the greatest areas of need. I would want to hear from county and DPS elected officials and staff, families in need of childcare/aftercare, and childcare service providers. It would be instructive to see models from other communities in North Carolina and other parts of the country. Finally, I would want to connect with our legislative delegation, the Governor’s office, and statewide advocates to see if this local initiative connects at all with ongoing state-level programs or advocacy. Some or all of this may already have been done, and I look forward to learning more.

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

Land-use planning and zoning are key to safer walking and biking routes to school. However, decades of U.S. and Durham growth have prioritized vehicles over pedestrian and cyclist safety, placing highways through cities and making walking and biking hazardous. I’m fortunate my children walk and bike to Durham Public Schools because we live in a compact, urban neighborhood with sidewalks and caring crossing guards. Still, they must cross dangerous major roads and ride alongside unsafe streets, which worries me even though I want them to be independent.

Durham needs to put people before cars through changes to the Unified Development Ordinance and by fully implementing Vision Zero, starting with safety audits and quick-build fixes on high-injury corridors this fall. There are good projects underway, but problems with execution persist. The city must act with more urgency. I was glad to see budget support for redesigning Roxboro and Mangum into two-way streets and I will push the city and DOT to advance these and similar projects citywide. This also ties into the planned build-out of protected bike lanes, which I support expanding.

Finally, fostering collaboration among the city, county, and Durham Public Schools is critical. As one of Durham’s largest landowners, the school system’s decisions on school locations and property design significantly impact children’s safety traveling to and from school. Coordinated efforts here are essential to improving overall safety.