

**Independent Weekly Candidate Questionnaire
2012 Durham County Commissioners
(Democratic Primary)**

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1. An Open Letter to Durham.

Dear Durham,

I love you Durham. You are an amazing city, a wondrous county. You are the only place I have ever called home.

I love your downtown indie/folk/hipster/queer/grunge-scene. I love your hip-hop/jazz/blues/urban-renewal. I love your parks and forests and your rivers and lakes. I love you North and South. I cheer your Devils, Bulls, your Eagles. I love you Durham, your history and your future.

But Durham, I have bad news.

Of all big Southern cities, you are the youngest (avg. age ~31).
But your elected leaders are the oldest (avg. ~66).

In yours politics, Durham, the label “Outsider” is a death knell. It’s worse than when a Congressman is tagged as an “insider.”

Durham, you’ve stayed the same too long, politically. “Newcomer” has taken on a humorous Orwellian meaning. The only “newcomers” with you are decade-long veterans of city/county appointed-committees. Your change-agents, Durham, are upper-middle class, in their 50s, and on a first-name basis with everyone currently in office.

That’s what counts for a fresh face, in Bull City politics these days.

You have a decades-old system of nepotism and influence peddling, self-aggrandizement, and ossification. It hasn’t been malevolent, or caused by individual persons. But the system is still keeping you down.

Durham, did you know you don't have any Latinos in government? 15% of your population, but no one in office.

And where are your Gays, your Lesbians in government, Durham?

Where is the representation for your LGBTQ?

75% of your people are under the age of 50 Durham, but none of your leaders.

Do you think any of them step foot in the Pinhook?

Have they heard Kooley High, or The Beast? Or even 9th Wonder?

Durham, why are you like this? How can you change?

The insiders all tell me that it's your big PACs. "The Big 3," they say, the Liberals, the Conservatives, and the African-Americans. Most people haven't heard of these PACs. But in political circles their mythology is unavoidable.

[Formally, they are the "Durham People's Alliance," "The Friends of Durham," and "The Committee On The Affairs Of Black People."]

Everyone agrees that a candidate must have the anointment of one of these PACs for you to elect them, Durham. And therein lies the problem.

Depending on who tells the story, things will get better only when one of the three PACs overwhelms/defeats the others, or some sort of grand-bargain is struck between the Liberals and the African-Americans.

And once they win, your incumbents tend to stay in office for decades. Put all that together Durham, and it's easy to see what went wrong. When a political culture doesn't see enough change, the long running problems get ignored.

I love you Durham, but lovers tell each other the truth. And the truth is that you've got problems. You've got problems beyond your politics.

You know what I'm talking about. 60% of your high schools are effectively racially segregated. Your black/white achievement gap is 55% worse than the rest of NC. A quarter of your children live in poverty. Nearly a third of your households are at risk of homelessness, or live in homes that lack refrigerators, showers, or other basic requirements.

Durham, you have neighborhoods with intergenerational poverty, neighborhoods where no one can be expected to break free. Your poverty rate has gone down over time, but not the number of people in poverty. Your crime rate has gone down, but the number of crimes in poor neighborhoods hasn't followed.

In short, Durham, you're not spreading the prosperity around. And you're not even dealing with it. In your State of the County Address, Durham, you spent 17

pages talking about your successes, and only a half page talking about your failures.

I'm telling you this because I love you. You have to change. Durham, you're at the peak of a nice long high. You're growing, but that growth is creating sprawl and congestion. You're getting richer, but that wealth is making segregation permanent. Your arts scene is booming. But the cheap housing that fueled that boom is quickly getting too expensive for the artists.

It doesn't heave to be this way. Durham, you are unique. You have the technological, educational, nonprofit, business, historic, activist, and cultural resources to transform yourself.

Your changes have to start with your political leaders. And right now, they're not ready for change.

One of them told me, one of the sitting Commissioners: "you shouldn't run. You need to wait your turn. There are lots of other people ahead of you in line, and they've been waiting a long time."

Another one told me, straight out, that I would be a good commissioner. But, they wouldn't support me because of Big-3-PAC dynamics. They couldn't risk offending anyone. I should come back, they said, in 8 years, after spending a decade on some County appointed committee.

Durham, we can't afford to wait in line. We don't have eight years. We are at a crossroads in 2012. We can become the vision of Durham we aspire to be, or we can sink back into mediocrity.

Don't worry Durham; I have good news.

Change is possible. The Big-3-PAC story is a lie. It's a self-fulfilling prophecy, but it's not the truth. Our polling says that on a tiny fraction of primary voters care about PAC endorsements. And it says that they overwhelmingly think it's time for a change on our County Commission.

Durham, we have an election in which the County Commission will see it's greatest change in decades. Will that be a radical change for the better? Or will it be a change that is more of the same?

Dear Durham, please choose wisely. Do your research. I know you will.

With much love,
-John Owens

2. Describe your past leadership roles, both in career and community. How will these experiences help you serve on the Board of Commissioners? Please be specific about how these roles correspond to a commissioner's responsibilities.

Okay. Now that I've got the letter out of the way, what's next?

Oh, right, the "leadership" question. I've found this question is usually a proxy for the age question and/or the establishment test.

It's also a false positive, a bad predictor. All five sitting commissioners are, by definition, our County leaders. They can all list long impressive sounding lists of their leadership roles and their experiences. In fact, by definition, our current five commissioners are the most experienced possible choices for commissioner.

(But we can all agree that we don't want all five of them back next year, hence, false positive.)

And it's worth noting that the emphasis placed on prior involvement government or community leadership is completely out of step with what voters care about. The top traits voters are looking for, in every poll, are creativity, honesty, integrity, and ideological similarity. Way down in the bottom 20-30 most important traits are "experienced" and "leadership," (about as important as "attractive").

(For the record: My leadership working for the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, and managing other campaigns, has taught me how to motivate workers based on the incentive of doing good for the world, and not just good for themselves.

I've learned how to scaffold the leadership potential of my employees; in fact, several former employees and interns first started politics on one of my campaigns, and now work for Mayors, State Senators, and U.S. Senators.

I've learned how to build complicated and diverse partnerships between large communities with separate interests. That's how you win campaigns—the Democratic Party is both diverse and fragmented. Putting those pieces together with community buy-in is what I've done politically, and it will help me serve a city like Durham.

There, I've answered the question. -J)

But really, you shouldn't ask the leadership/experience question. None of the good answers will be especially credible. The only group of candidates who will give bad answers (and who wouldn't disqualify themselves in some other way) are young leaders

with less experience than I have. It's another structural barrier to youth in politics, and we have enough of those as is.

If I sound a little disappointed, I apologize. But I am.

Honestly, I'm disappointed with this entire endorsement process. This entire questionnaire reeks of the small-bore minutia of a planning commission meeting, plus a popcorn assortment of the questions you ask when hiring junior-level management at a large corporation.

None of that is how you find a good commissioner.

While running for commissioner, I've realized how to spot the good ones and weed out the bad. It's actually easy. You corner a candidate for 15 minutes, and make them tell you exactly what they want to do—no platitudes, no generalities, no personal heliography. It becomes obvious 5 minutes in which ones have substance or spark. (*Note, this test doesn't always work for incumbents. Some can talk for hours without saying anything).

If you can't the test in person, you can do the same thing in just three written questions:

- Write 3 pages about the biggest problem facing Durham.
- Write 3 pages about what you propose to do to work on this problem, and your long-range plan to fix it.
- Write 2 pages about who you are, and why you are a good leader to tackle this issue.

Any other issue-position questions (like 751 or the Amendment) can be rattled off in a page of yes/no or "1-to-5" answers. You'll learn much more that way.

But with these 11 *Indy* questions, the only options for candidates are:

- Fill them out completely and thoroughly, which should take at least 20-30 pages. The reporters who have to read it usually look down on this type of answer, and establishment political leaders find it impertinent and unserious.
- Ignore them. One-sentence answers. I've noticed this answer-strategy is popular with most candidates when outside friendly territory.
- Gloss over the questions with a paragraph each. This approach is far-and-away the most popular. The 1-or-2 paragraph answer tells the reader basically the same as the one-sentence version would have. The difference is that the extra stuff makes it look credible. No extra substance, but a bunch of extra fluff. Somehow this approach often garners endorsements (because endorsements have so little to do with actual questions or answers).

Anyway, I've already written 20 page questionnaires for the People's Alliance and for the Durham Committee. I'm attaching those questionnaires to the end of this one. If you want nuance, look there. For most of the other 10 *Indy* questions, I'm going with the short-answer approach.

Early voting starts in 12 days. I've got volunteer calls to return, a major fundraiser host committee to coordinate, \$2,000 to raise, and 4,000 pieces of lit to get into the mail... before Tuesday. Sadly, I have no more time for substance.

If there is a question I didn't answer, seriously, give me a call. I'm always happy to talk to a reporter about something substantive.

3. How do you define yourself politically and how does your political philosophy show itself in your past achievements and present campaign platform?

I am a Liberal, and a Progressive.

Liberal has been, since the time of Locke, a political philosophy anchored with the idea of the greatest good for the greatest number. The Progressive movement is a much more recent social movement that unites disparate groups that would benefit from liberal changes, and unites them against powerful entrenched interests.

Both of these are essential parts of who I am, what I've done, and what I intend to do as a commissioner.

All these traits are practically stamped all over my platform, and the platforms of almost every candidate and nonprofit I've worked for in my life.

4. List the three most important issues facing Durham, in order of priority. If elected, how will you address these issues? Please be specific.

Poverty
Education (as it relates to poverty)
Social Services & Human Welfare (especially as it relates to poverty)
Housing (as it relates to the arts, and to poverty, and quality of life)
Crime (as it relates to poverty)
Transit (poverty, economy, environmental impact)
Etc.

5. Identify a principled stand you might be willing to take if elected, that you know would cost you popularity points with voters.

Good ideas aren't always popular. I have no problem bucking the trend. And with four years to explain myself to the voters, I have faith that Durham will come around if my principled stand was the right one.

For example, people love love love free parking. But offering free parking is incredibly expensive, economically inefficient, and hard on businesses. It usually kills foot traffic, and the asphalt is terrible for the environment. I will consistently push that we have only as much parking as market forces demand (in 95% of circumstances). This will push up the cost of parking, but be good for Durham in practically every way.

6. Please describe how you handled a difficult decision in your community leadership experience or career. What were the possible consequences of the decision you made? Looking back, please explain whether you are still comfortable with how you handled the situation, or how you would change your actions.

Deciding to step out of politics, in order to take care of my daughter, was very hard. In 2008, I was a top-flight campaign manager, with a national network, and eight years of experience. But politics is a fast moving world. If I hadn't been drafted to run for Commissioner, I would be running a State Senate campaign now, instead of a major state-wide race.

No doubt in my mind; I made the right choice. My daughter is much more important than my career.

7. Last fall, voters approved new sales taxes to generate new revenue for the Durham Public Schools and for mass transit in the county. Did you vote for or against these measures? Please explain why.

I voted for both of them.

We needed both sets of revenue.

The County Commission immediately implemented the "schools tax," because they had assumed it would pass. They had effectively borrowed against that assumption, and they needed to implement the tax in order to backfill the budget.

They have not yet implemented the transit tax (which passed by a much higher margin). The main goal of the tax is to implement a Triangle-wide rail line. But, in the meantime, we could be upgrading our existing transit system to be more in line with Orange and Wake.

It's astonishing to me that we aren't doing that yet, even though the people want it, the County needs it, and the voters approved it.

8. The newly adopted Durham County Strategic Plan identifies the need in Durham County to expand residents' access to technology. As a commissioner, how would you work toward this goal and how would you finance the efforts?

We're living in a brave new world of technology, a world that is changing at an exponential rate. The amazing changes that have taken place in the last four years (the birth of both Twitter and the iPhone) will be dwarfed by the changes that take place in the next four.

For instance, it would be cheaper today to buy every person in Durham a Kindle, than to continue operating our public libraries.

That doesn't mean we should get rid of libraries, but it does mean we should rethink how and why and where we invest these resources.

I think the Strategic plan is well intentioned. I think the broad idea of technology access is a good one. But I think it was written by people who know little about technology, or little about technology usage among lower-class Durham resident, or both. It's also more than a little paternalistic.

Even among the subpopulations in Durham in the most extreme poverty, almost everyone has a cell phone, and through their cellphone almost everyone uses Twitter. If you walk into Durham Tech and look around at the computers, you see a hundred screens all on Face, Twitter, or YouTube. Again, I don't think that's a bad thing. But I think the fundamental assumptions of what "technology access" is, and why it's important, are mistaken.

The real issue is technology integration. What can our citizens do with the technology they have? Not technology access for technology's sake. What is the missing link that takes their existing capability and makes it into a better life?

For some this will be tutoring on how to use computers, connecting a fixed-income grandmother to her grandchildren in a different city. For some this will be fiber-optic networks, allowing a bedroom programmer to use cloud processing and use that to innovate. For some people it will be simple WiFi hotspots. For others, loaning them a Kindle really would be a good idea.

No more time for this question, but you get the gist.

9. What are the pros and cons of the county's economic incentives program? How would you amend it? What oversight mechanisms are in place to ensure companies adhere to the policy? Are those oversight mechanisms sufficient?

Most economic incentives are a travesty. They're extortion at worst, and a market distortion at best. They're a race to the bottom, but they're what we have to live with in the modern world.

As long as we're distorting the market though, we should be getting a lot out of it. We should offer generous incentives, but they should come with riders attached. See my answer about Cengenta & anti-recidivism programs in the Durham Committee questionnaire.

If we require much more from the companies, the oversight scheme will need to be reworked. But, with more resources at each company, thorough oversight should be easier to accomplish, with no companies slipping through the cracks or shirking their compliance.

10. What incentives would be appropriate in persuading the commercial and industrial sectors to cut their greenhouse gas emissions? The residential sector? Durham County in 2007 adopted a Greenhouse Gas Emissions plan, but at what point will Durham need to take more aggressive steps in emissions reductions?

Let's start with incentives we offer for people to increase their greenhouse emissions. The 2007 plan, and the '12 Comprehensive plan, call for reduced car usage.

But several of the largest capital projects the county completed since 2007 included massive parking decks, parking lots, and other parking subsidies.

One of the largest projects in our 2012 Capital Improvement Plan is another giant downtown parking deck.

Subsidized parking is an incentive to increase emissions. Obviously, subsidized mass transit would be an incentive to decrease emissions. But I covered that under the transit tax section.

But the biggest effect on our greenhouse gas emissions is our electricity consumption. To the extent we can, we should push Duke Energy to increase their electricity prices, at a tiered rate.

The electricity rates should rise to a point higher than almost anyone can afford, and then we should rebate most of that money right back to the residents as cash. This is an efficient way to change consumer behavior.

They can use the cash to pay for their electricity, or more likely, they will reduce consumption and keep the surplus.

Note: This plan would require unprecedented coordination with Duke Energy. It would probably never happen. But since we don't control their rates, it's the best proposal I can offer.

Finally, we should transition to a per-bag trash collection system. It's astounding that in most of Durham, trash collection is every week but recycling every-other. We need to flip that dynamic. If recycling is free, and trash costs money, people will change habits quickly.

We already have some long-term waste management contracts. But as we adopt plans for 5 and 10 years down the line, a per-bag charge is a no-brainer policy we should be adopting.

11. Crime and safety is a large component of county government. What are your priorities for improvements in pre- and post-conviction services, such as prisoner re-entry programs and diversion programs for juveniles? How will you fund those priorities? How will you measure the success of those programs?

I cover this pretty extensively in the Durham Committee questionnaire.

The gun-crimes-bond plan is unconstitutional, and for good reason.

We should rethink how and where we house inmates.

We should learn from TROSA.

Juveniles in need of a diversion program are almost certainly past the point of no return.

We need early-childhood ed.

12. Among the most controversial issues to test the commissioners in recent years is development. Please explain the philosophy that will guide your decisions on development while serving as a county commissioner, and also share your definition of smart growth.

Smart growth is whatever you want it to mean. That's why we use the phrase so much. I've heard it used by the 751-Development's top lawyer. Almost every candidate at the last Commissioner's forum used it. It basically means "growth I am in favor of."

That being said, the growth I am in favor of, is denser. It's environmentally sustainable, and it's mixed use whenever possible. It's neighborhood-character focused, but it increasing housing units faster than the growth rate. I think that's a smart philosophy. But in the past week I've decided to stop using the phrase smart growth. I'm pro growth. I'm anti-stupid growth. That should be enough to differentiate me.

The Durham Committee on the Affairs of Black People: Questions & Answers.

1. Why are you running for Durham County Commissioner?

Durham's Commission does not currently represent the people of Durham. It represents some of the people, maybe most of them. It represents important parts of Durham. It represents Durham's history. And it still represents *some* of what Durham is today. But the Commission is missing essential parts of who we are as a city and a county.

Durham has long endured systemic poverty, a poverty that is sickening. Durham has an intergenerational poverty that has persisted far too long. Fighting that poverty should be our number one priority, every day, until we defeat it.

Despite its share of heartbreak, Durham is a vibrant city today. Durham has a new power now, a youthful, changing power; we have an economic, technological, innovative power.

And never do the three meet.

The young energy, the poverty, and the Commission.

As a candidate, I stand at the crossroads of these three worlds.

I was raised in the same poverty, the same crime, and the same broken educational system that Durham faces. And, it's not the same poverty, crime, or segregation we had in the '50s, '60s, and '70s.

Today, we have a new segregation. We face a segregation that all-but-the-most-committed activists have decided to ignore. I grew up in those neighborhoods and schools. My grade school was 95% African American, and more than 95% free lunch. Today's segregation is economic as much as it is racial.

It's not legally enforced, but it's a segregation almost as strict as the '50s. There are no more white seats at the front of the busses, but then again, these days we have a bus system that almost no white people ever ride.

And we have a different poverty now. We face a poverty where social services are dehumanizing, and the social safety net is a sticky web to catch us when we fall, but keeps us stuck when we land. It's a poverty that divides our communities, as sharp as segregation does.

Those who need help the most have no neighbors to lean on, and have no churches they call home. Those who succeed too often decide to get-out, not give-back.

I was raised in this poverty. Food stamps put food on my family's table, and subsidized housing a roof over our heads. I saw, I benefited, from the safety net. I knew others who slipped through. I know that much of my success was luck, much of it the church, my family, and much of it the kindness and opportunity of innovative nonprofits, community groups, and government programs.

I know the good, and the bad, of the neighborhoods of modern poverty.

And it is a different crime my generation has faced. We are in an era of plastic handguns that fire real bullets. Plastic guns so cheap, they're as disposable as the temporary cell phones sold in gas stations. We are still in the era of crack cocaine and failed mandatory minimum sentencing guidelines.

We're in the era of zero tolerance policies making criminals of middle-schoolers. I grew up in this world. I remember every mugging, every robbery, every friend who joined a gang, every stray bullet on the playground.

All these things in Durham, all of these things in my childhood are a part of me. But they are not *all* of me. And they aren't all of Durham.

As a teen, I saved up and bought a computer; I started learning website design; I started a small business. That lead to working with nonprofits and community groups helping them become more efficient through use of technology. Today, Durham has a vibrant, young, high-tech economy. Durham has innovative nonprofits who help *other* cities fight poverty.

This is why Durham can heal itself. The healing will take all the parts of Durham. It will take Durham's leaders and Durham's history. It will take activists in the communities most in need. It will take the young energy, and the economic engine. It will take every commissioner who has been a part of the rancor and the incivility. It will take new voices, new perspectives, and a new commitment to putting Durham first.

I believe in Durham. I believe we can be the city upon the hill, an example for our country. I'm not being trite or idealistic. These are not clichés. I am running for County Commissioner because I believe in Durham. I believe we will overcome our challenges; we will heal ourselves.

I believe my generation will play its roll in the transformation. I believe every fraction of Durham will be a part of the whole solution. Every part of our County must have a seat at the table. This is why I'm running for County Commissioner.

2. Why should the citizens of Durham County vote for you?

I am young, but my long record of public service, activism, and political involvement speaks for itself. I've worked with not-for-profit organizations, as well as in the "new economy" technology sector.

For more than ten years, I have devoted my life to causes for the greater good. I've turned down opportunities to make more money, and offers to move to cities supposedly more exciting.

I love Durham, and I believe in Durham. I have the personal experience to know what problems must be addressed, and I have the passion and energy to tackle them.

I've spent years reading and learning the public policy research, and studying innovative solutions throughout the country. I've lived it, and I've seen what works and what doesn't.

I won't win every fight. I won't solve any problems overnight. But the citizens of Durham deserve at least one person on the Commission who will make sure these issues are never lost in the shuffle of zoning, procedural minutia, parking garage construction, and incremental budget modifications.

And I will work harder than anyone else running. Every person who has ever worked for me, and every person who has ever worked with me will tell you the same thing: When I believe in a job, with all my heart and my soul, I will work passionately. They will tell you that I work tirelessly for what I believe.

3. What is your understanding of the mission of the Durham Committee on the Affairs of Black People and how will your candidacy support its mission?

I haven't lived the history of the Durham Committee. I can't presume to fully know its mission.

But I know my mission and I know the young leaders who are members of the Committee. I know that my values and my priorities overlap with theirs. I know that the Committee wants a more just, vibrant, and integrated Durham. I want these things; I work for these things.

I know the Durham Committee promotes African American candidates. And I know that Zach Hawkins was my first friend in Durham. In fact, in January I tried to convince him to run for this very Commissioner's seat I am running for now. I count both Danielle Adams and Donald Hughes as friends, and I see them as rising stars in both Durham's politics and culture.

As a Commissioner I will work to make sure more young leaders in Durham like them, and including them, are given a chance to step forward.

I know that the Durham Committee aims to lift up the parts of our county that have not shared in its prosperity. I don't live in Hope Valley Farms, Croasdale, or Forest Hills.

I live in North Durham (Carver & Roxboro).

As Commissioner, I will spend my time and energy in North Durham and East Durham, and South East Central. All the parts of Durham are important, but those are the communities where I know I can do the most good.

I don't know the Durham Committee's mission. But I know my mission.

4. How would you describe your leadership style?

There are currently six full-time members of my campaign staff, not counting my interns.

I originally put out advertisements for four positions. But while I conducted interviews, applicants kept offering to work for little or no pay, or to work full time for only part-time salary. Well-educated and talented individuals who I had never met before made these offers. After a few hours of interviews, they joined my campaign in order to be a part of something different.

This only happened because of my passion. Passion isn't usually a leadership style, but it best describes mine. Passion is the leadership style that worked for me when I was managing political campaigns, and it worked for me as a field director, a district manager, and a non-profit manager throughout the last decade. Whether I was overseeing a staff of 2 or 20 (or one-time 80), I've tried to instill my passion into my employees.

On my current campaign for County Commissioner, I give great discretion to members of my staff. I can do this because I know that they have the passion. I know that we've written and reviewed the campaign plan together; I know that they believe in it. I know we share the same values and that they will come to me if they need help or clarity. I know they have the passion. Then, the hardest part, I leave them free to do the best job they can do.

5. What amount of financial resources, how many volunteers and how many precincts will you bring to your campaign?

We are running what is almost certainly the most ambitious and innovative campaign in the history of Durham County Commissioner races. I don't say that to boast; it's just a fact. I have worked on numerous campaigns in the past, and been recognized as an expert in the field.

I have managed a congressional campaign, and I am treating this just like I would treat that level of a campaign. We have (as of today) seven paid staff. We have done extensive polling and we have what is certainly the most in-depth precinct analysis and voter model ever done in Durham.

We will spend \$15,000 minimum, but plan to, and are on track to, spend just over 30k.

We will be announcing soon that we have broken the all-time record on individual donations.

We will have poll workers at every precinct for every hour of voting, and at every early vote location, for every hour of voting. We are on track to make 90,000 voter contacts (by phone or door-to-door) by May 8th.

I don't do anything halfway, and I wouldn't be asking so much of my family, staff, donors, and volunteers, if I didn't know we would win.

6. What has been your most significant accomplishment that has benefitted Durham's African American community economically and educationally?

I am a representative to the organization DurhamCAN for my church. As a DurhamCAN representative, I lobbied the Durham City Council to renew and expand its youth jobs plan. The Council did renew and expand it.

African American youths between the ages of 16-24 were and are the primary beneficiaries of the program. But all of Durham benefits by putting our young people to work.

As a candidate, I know that I have had an impact on the debate. By constantly talking about the need to improve under-achieving schools in DPS, I have noticed a change in the way other candidates (and incumbents) talk about the issue.

At the INC candidate forum I made an impassioned call for Durham to have the best schools in North Carolina, and said that we must do more for all of our children. Every other candidate spoke more forcefully about the issue from that point onward. A similar phenomena occurred at the League of Women Voters forum the following week.

7. What three goals would you like to accomplish if elected. Describe your solutions.

My most first and greatest goal would be to announce that Durham will have the best schools in North Carolina within the next 10 years.

To make this announcement, we would need the unanimous voice of the Board of Commissioners, the City Council, the Mayor, and the School Board.

As a part of the plan, a committee would immediately be formed with representatives from all three bodies, as well as the chamber of commerce, tasked with developing the 10-year plan. Any major policy idea endorsed by that committee would have our guaranteed full support in dedicated revenue streams.

By showing our commitment, I am confident will be able to support business support, nonprofits, and foundations. Over time we will receive state and federal grants, if only we can show the city, the county, and the country that we are truly committed to this goal, and we will do whatever is necessary to accomplish it.

This first goal is as important and complicated as all others combined. If my only accomplishment as commissioner is that I lay the groundwork to make Durham's schools the best in the state, I will know I have still worked for the good.

I would also prioritize that we change the way in which we are fighting street crime generally, and gang activity specifically. Our current approach is almost exclusively designed to *convince* young people not to join gangs. This is misguided. I know from my personal experience, and I have read in the research, that this type of approach is ineffective.

Gang activity can be better diverted by offering better economic channels, and by focusing on incarcerating gang members who have more recently joined in a separate facility where they can be rehabilitated outside the influence of the gang of which they are a member. Their self identity needs to be changed, so they no longer think of the gang as their community.

In our current incarceration system for street level crimes (drug dealing, gun possession, street fights, etc), gang members are placed in jail for temporary periods of time with other members of gangs. They come out of the prison system identifying even more strongly with the gang than when they went in.

Implementing the incarceration changes will require broad policy agreement on the Commission, and the support of other parts of county government. There is no quick fix. But overhauling the Joint Taskforce on Gang Prevention should be relatively quick. We only need to work with the City Council to lay out new guidelines for where the Taskforce should be prioritizing its resources.

Finally, our County is wasting incredible resources by having a woefully outdated usage of technology. I can't promise the amount of money we could save by adopting simple technological practices used by companies all over Durham, but I would guess it's in the low millions of dollars.

That is money that we desperately need to be using elsewhere. I would prioritize bringing in young consultants to analyze every aspect of every department and show us how our technological use compares to similar sized "companies."

8. What will you do to enable Durham County to attract industries that are better aligned with the current skill level of the County's workforce?

I don't think Durham County has a homogenous "skill level."

By and large, our industries are aligned with our skill levels. What we need is more economic activity, of all kinds, in neighborhoods where people can't find work.

What we need are programs to raise the skill levels of those who need jobs. We don't have street level 'mom & pop' stores in most of East Durham anymore.

It's not about attracting new industries like steel or tobacco or textiles, it's about creating a community vibrant enough to support those shops again. Those shops will need clerks, janitors, accountants—that's where an economy is built.

Durham's high tech economy is amazing. Those are the kinds of industries we can attract. But those industries won't add jobs across the board.

9. If you had been a sitting county commissioner, how would you have voted on the 751 land assemblage? Please explain for or against.

After the developer's dirty tricks, I would certainly have voted against it. With all due respect to Commissioners Page, Howerton, and Bowser, I don't know how anyone could have voted for it in good conscience.

The 751-South development, as pushed through, had many problems. But the biggest was that it was going to cost the city and county money in the short run, and provide jobs mostly to out-of-county contractors.

That being said, I'm not against development in that area. As a new commissioner, I am hopeful I could bring a new voice to the conversation, and serve as a neutral mediator while we find workable solution between the city, the county, and the developers.

I have spoken with the lawyers who represent the developers, and I don't think that a middle ground would be impossible. I am pro development; I just want to see it done in a way that is environmentally safe, economically sound, and ethically transparent.

It should also be noted, that stopping 751 would not mean new jobs aren't created. 751 was a profitable idea, because there is a demand for more retail and more housing. That demand will be filled.

If we fill that demand near Jordan Lake, we greatly imperil our water supply. That means higher water and sewer rates, and more restrictions on watering gardens an such.

If we fill that demand near Jordan Lake, most of the jobs will go to Wake County. But if we fill that demand in other parts of Durham, which is what happens when we stop 751, then the jobs will stay here, and our environment will be protected.

It's not an either/or between jobs and the environment. We can have more jobs, and, a healthier environment if we negotiate the difficult choices without creating unnecessary animosities.

10. How would you if elected address employment opportunities for Durham citizens returning from prison? Explain.

One, we need to be putting less people in jail to begin with. Incarceration for nonviolent crimes does not need to be in a regular prison. It can be house arrest of some form, or many other options.

We are turning people into hardened criminals by sending them on to a 5-year training camp on how to be a criminal, how to join a gang, and who to know to do both. That's what most jails are. It's absurd that we send someone selling a little bit of marijuana to that place. And it's not surprising they come back with such high recidivism rates.

That being said, out parts of the country have figured out how to do this far better than we are doing it. People returning from prison need to be sent, as a condition of their release, to a house in a far far different part of the city from their old neighborhood. They need to immediately enter a living-stipend internship program at a major corporation.

We just gave a giant business incentive to Cengenta in RTP, but as a condition of that deal, we could have required they allow 500 returning non-violent offenders to intern in their mailroom or janitorial staff over the course of 10 years.

But we don't do that. Instead we let "business incentives" live in one part of our County Commission discussion, and fighting crime exist in different conversations.

11. What steps are necessary to maintain the long-term fiscal health of Durham County's government?

Durham County's government is already fiscally healthy. Our tax base grows every year, as new residents and business come in. We lowered property taxes repeatedly in the last decade, which means we have some room to go back up if necessary.

Our fiscal health may actually be too much of a focus. We pride ourselves that we have a AAA bond rating, but there is no major correlation between having such a rating and having a prosperous county.

Most of the other counties in the nation that have a AAA rating have a rich homogenous population. But Durham has substantial problems, especially around poverty and education. It's those problems that most endanger our long-term financial health.

I will take out loans to send my daughter to college some day, and I won't think twice about whether it hurts my credit score. The children of this county who are homeless don't care whether we have a AAA bond rating. That rating makes our County Manager look good, but in context it puts our county to shame.

12. What is your view of the local tax structure and what, if any, changes would you make?

We tax too much during bad times (like now) and too little during good times. This entire economic crisis would have hit Durham less hard, had we saved enough reserve funds to get us through that first terrible year.

This is the most important problem with our current tax policy, although not our tax structure per se. Right now we should be using our bond authority and reserve funds to pull ourselves out of the rest of this recession.

A small amount of growth, like we had last year, isn't enough, and raising taxes or cutting services to supplement that growth is less effective than borrowing or spending from reserves.

It is widely recognized that sales taxes and prepared food taxes are more regressive than taxes such as income and real property. But, during a boom time, the total level of taxation needs to rise. That's when we can commit the funds towards actually ending intergenerational poverty, or actually improving our schools.

13. Do you affirm that you are a full-time resident of the county?

Yes, absolutely. Today, and for the rest of my life.

People's Alliance Questionnaire

1. **How did you vote (would you have voted) on the 751 zoning case and why? What should be done about the project going forward? What was right/wrong about the process?**

“Given the potentially illegal but certainly immoral actions of the developer, I don't know how anybody could cast a vote in favor of [the 751-development] even if they favored the project.”

In my *Herald-Sun* profile, that was the first quote they used. I stand by what I said to the reporter, Ray Gronberg. Regardless of the environmental or economic impact of the development, it's impossible to justify supporting the zoning after the way it was pushed through.

Unfortunately, the 751-South debate is emblematic of the Board's recent history. Even more unfortunately, the entire debacle could have been avoided with better planning.

Durham is growing as a city and county (and that's not a bad thing). Population growth includes expansion of the urban area. It includes new developments, and in some cases it inevitably includes major developments. Population growth strains our air, water, and land resources. But none of those factors needs to dangerously threaten our environmental resources the way 751-South does. The way we decide where and how to grow needs to be careful, but it doesn't need to be contentious.

Boylan Development Company / Southern Durham Development resorted to extreme and immoral tactics primarily because their backs were against the wall. They invested an incredible amount of money acquiring the 167 acres of 751-South development land, and they staked a lot on attracting investors to the project. From news accounts, it seems that they were also overleveraged as a company. Without moving ahead on 751, they were in financial jeopardy.

Meanwhile, the way in which the developers wanted to move forward was unacceptable to those of us concerned with protecting Durham's natural resources.

By the summer of 2010, there was no good solution. When both sides are playing in a zero-sum game, there is no compromise. If I had been a Commissioner on August 9th 2010, I would have sided with protecting Jordan Lake, and not with Commissioners Page, Howerton, and Bowser.

But if I had been on the Board two years earlier, I would have worked to avoid the entire problem. We can avoid these standoffs if the County lays down strict environmental planning guidelines, and Commissioners agreed unanimously to uphold strict and consistent enforcement of the guidelines and development policy.

The false dichotomy of commissioners that are “pro-environment” and those that are “pro-business” leads inevitably to these conflicts. And, inevitably, sometimes the developers will win. That means the only guaranteed way to protect our environment is by finding a common ground, and sticking to it.

2. Give an example of the effective use of a "committed element".

Since 2006, Durham County's development guidelines have *recommended* that committed elements be submitted at least five days before a board meeting. That is an absurdly short amount of time. Five days is not enough time for citizen review, and usually not enough time for county review, or for a reporter to investigate. To make matters worse, the five-day rule is routinely waived.

With major committed elements, as with all civil contracts, the devil is in the details. For example, one proposed committed element attached to the 751-South development concerned affordable housing. But the definition of "affordable housing" is complicated. The assumptions made by the developers were highly suspect when it came to transportation costs and other cost-of-living measurements.

Before Durham can make the most effective use of committed elements in the zoning process, we will need to revise these rules and guidelines. They need to be more transparent, consistent, and we need to give policymakers and the public more time to review.

That being said, committed elements are often an effective resource in the County's development toolkit. I believe that the county (and city) should not demand committed elements just for their own sake. There must be a clear rationale behind pushing a developer to go beyond existing code. In my view, there are two main policy reasons to request committed elements. Along with each policy view, I will also identify a specific example of effective use.

1. Committed elements are important in correcting ways in which the development market is likely to make structural errors.

No matter what Ron Paul might try to tell you, the free market is prone to making structural mistakes, even ones that are unprofitable. Committed elements ensuring affordable housing are a perfect example.

It is in the best economic interest of developers, collectively, to create a thriving affordable housing market. But it's not usually in the interest of any individual developer to begin building affordable housing outside of low-income neighborhoods. This is obvious in Durham with the condo/loft market downtown.

Collectively, it would be wonderful for developers if there were a thriving affordable housing market downtown. It would be profitable on its own, but it would also buoy the downtown cultural scene, which would raise the value of high-end condos too.

But individually, any given developer on any given individual project, would be shooting themselves in the foot by including affordable housing. Pricing one

condo in a development at \$100,000 makes it nearly impossible to price top units at \$750k.

Other counties and municipalities across the US have had success with a routine use of this type of committed element. It's one of the reasons why you do find mixed income housing in many larger cities.

2. Committed elements are an effective way to correct market externalities not otherwise accounted for in the cost/benefit economics of a development.

The most obvious, and dangerous, "market externality" is pollution. We don't put the "price" of global warming or acid rain into the price of gasoline or coal plants, much to the world's detriment. At the local level, those types of major pollution dangers should be completely avoided through zoning (cough cough, 751-South). Beyond pollution, there are other market externalities often overlooked, like aesthetics and proximate functionality.

Ostensibly, there has been a gas station at the intersection of 9th Street and Main for the last 75 years. But the transformation of the old Granite Filling Station into the contemporary BP Family Fare was a travesty for the aesthetics of that popular section of town. The change was (probably) completely up to code the entire time, but the effect was terrible.

Original Granite Service Station



Meanwhile, just a few blocks away on Broad Street there is a different BP. The Broad Street station includes a brick façade, sidewalks, trees, and a tasteful canopy. It fits in with the walkable neighborhood, thanks to effective use of committed elements.



Similar useful committed elements include asking a developer to financially offset the construction of sidewalks, place a bus stop shelter out front, plant more canopy trees than required by code, etc.

My one caveat however, is that such elements should not serve as informal ordinance. Any element that is being routinely negotiated with developers should be considered for inclusion in the ordinance standard. For example, it might sound onerous to require more canopy trees of all developments. But in practice, most developers will benefit from the leveled playing field and clearer expectations.

3. What's your position on the firing of the director of Social Services? What should have been done differently (if anything) and what should happen now?

I don't always like the slogan "look forward not backwards." For instance, I think President Obama was wrong not to look back and investigate the sundry illegal actions of the Bush administration.

But the Social Services firing is one case in which looking forward is by far the best approach. One of our Commissioners made mistakes, something that he has acknowledged. There has been an investigation, which found what we all already knew: inappropriate actions were taken, but probably not illegal ones. If anything else illegal happened, that would come to light in a civil suit, and not through further investigation on the part of the Board.

Ms. Robinson's firing was legal. The immediate hiring of Ms. Perry was ethically suspect, but at worst a legal misdemeanor. But it's not productive to dwell on any of those facts. Ms. Perry is an interim director. We should be finding a new director as expediently as possible, regardless of the circumstances of her appointment.

Looking forward, there should be more restrictive guidelines on the way in which Commissioners may discuss personnel matters with those employed by the County. Listing a Commissioner as a reference, when applying for a County position, should be disallowed. And Commissioners "forwarding applicants to department heads" is going to cause trouble again eventually. The best thing will be to remove Commissioners from any part of the hiring process (except obviously top management). Commissioners should send all resumes they are given to one central person in H.R. That person should review them, and then pass them on to various departments anonymously.

Looking forward with DSS specifically, well, Social Services needs much larger overhauls than a personnel change, even when that person is the director. But those overhauls are unrelated to the specific mini-scandal in question.

- 4. Now that the Legislature has removed the cap on charter schools, what can the BOCC do to ensure that these schools are innovative, of sufficient quality, and provide equal access for ALL of Durham's students?**
- a. I have a close friend from Duke who grew up in the worst part of the barrio of San Diego. She spent most of her childhood living on the couch of her mother's ex-boyfriend—because everyone else she'd met in her life was abusive and dangerous, including her parents. She wasn't ever appropriately fed, or clothed, and she graduated from Duke with honors. She's now an awesome queer-feminist activist here in Durham. Literally none of her childhood friends ever attended college. The obvious difference between them and her, is that she lucked into a KIPP-style charter school, a charter located in her neighborhood with the mission of trying to help kids just like her.
 - b. I grew up in deep poverty. I attended a terrible crumbling public school. The first several years of elementary, my classroom was in a building constructed as a "temporary" structure during World War II. My class sizes through eighth grade ranged from 32-35, with poorly paid teachers, no teacher aids, and no A.C. If my parents could have entered a lottery to get me into any other school, they would have.
 - c. I've read extensively the academic literature on charter schools. Education policy is my passion. (Ask my friends... I really am likely to be reading the *Harvard Educational Review* on any given night, just for fun. I'm a nerd). The literature says that charter schools underperform compared to regular public schools. The literature says that charter schools often lead to economic and racial segregation, even worse than the persistent economic and racial segregation that is the norm in regular public schools.
 - d. All of these things make it hard for me to come up with a consistent opinion on charter schools. I've spoken with school board members Nancy Cox and Natalie Beyer about charters. I've debated at length with the Executive Director of Educators For Change. I've attended People's Alliance events and membership meetings on the issue. But I just can't square the circle.
 - e. Our current educational system is broken. I say this as the son, and brother, of union-member, public school teachers. And I say this as a former employee of the Educator's Association during two different election cycles. But our educational system is broken. I can't blame anyone for pinning their hopes to something, anything, even charter schools, if they think it might fix the system.
 - f. The preponderance of evidence says charter schools are not the way. For every story like the one of my friend from San Diego, there are several less heartwarming. If I could have stopped the Assembly from lifting the cap, I certainly would have.

Those are the facts of my knowledge and experiences that shape my views of charter schools. I've explained my general ideology towards charters, even though this question

is forward looking and non-ideological. I needed to do this, because I think it's important all of the Commissioners and school board members have their cards on the table. Right now we have an extreme disconnect between the public school charter community, and the Durham Public School system. Much of that disconnect is by design, but much of it is fueled by dichotomous animosity. Locked into rigid beliefs, there is no room for healthy dialogue or cooperation. And I have seen the distrust on both sides of the debate.

But it doesn't really matter if a policy maker in Durham thinks that charters are the best thing since sliced bread, or if they think charters are an evil racist plot to topple public education as we know it. It really doesn't matter. Either way, the best step forward for Durham's students is a better-integrated voluntary partnership between the charters and DPS.

*The Question: What can the BOCC do to **ensure** that these schools are innovative, of sufficient quality, and provide equal access for ALL of Durham's students?*

The answer is, nothing. Or almost nothing. We've recently seen exactly how much Raleigh cares what the Durham County Commission and the Durham School Board think about charters in Durham. Statutorily, there's nothing we can do. We can lobby, but that hasn't worked. The PA sent hundreds of postcards to the State Board of Education opposing the new RTP Charter (I sent fourteen myself). As far as I can tell, that lobbying was summarily ignored.

We cannot ensure the charters will provide equal access. We cannot force them to innovate. But goodhearted people run many of these charters. They're trying to do something positive to fix a very real problem, even if their methods may be misguided. Most of those charter leaders would love to partner with or work with DPS in some way, even if informally.

Creating and sustaining that dialogue will be beneficial to all parties, no matter what the long-term outcome. There are only two obvious long-term scenarios:

Scenario 1) If charters are going to stick around forever, then we're going to have to develop these relationships eventually. In order to succeed, DPS and the charters will have to coexist, and probably even share resources. We should start the dialogue now.

Scenario 2) If the charter system is going to be transformed or ended, then preexisting good relationships will be crucial during the reintegration of charters into DPS.

In the meantime, a healthy working relationship will benefit DPS in two ways. First, we can keep a watchful eye for the worst failings at the Durham charters. Second, we can make sure we learn from any positive innovations charters bring.

I have one last point that can't afford to be left out. Namely, charters are popular for lots of reasons, and we can't ignore that. If Durham Public Schools was the best school system in all of North Carolina, no one would enroll in the lotteries.

DPS should be the best. How we get there from here is a complicated question. The answer is sure to involve reevaluation, reform, and revenue. But best should be the goal, and we shouldn't lose sight of that goal while we worry about charters. If we have the best schools, the charters will go away.

5. What Knowledge will you bring to County Government?

I read the budget carefully every year. I follow the politics and the policy in the press, and behind the curtain. I have friends and colleagues on most of the different committees. And I've occasionally lobbied on issues where I thought the Board could be influenced (like 751-South).

I've read every document on the County website. I know municipal-level public policy inside and out. I've been watching the last five years of videotaped BOCC meetings, in order (1000+ hours of footage).

I have interacted personally with almost every single branch and major department of County government at some point (The County Sheriff's department and County Jail are the ones I'm missing. Somehow, I haven't been arrested imprisoned yet).

When elected in the Primary, I will have eight months until taking office. I intend to sit in on each county committee, meet with each principal at each school, and of course, keep reading.

6. What are your top two priorities if you are (re-)elected?

Ending poverty and fixing education. This question requires another long answer. But I'm going to push that answer back to Question 11. I cannot ever separate the question of "what is our biggest challenge?" from "what is my top priority."

The abbreviated version of my answer though, is this. The two immediate actionable issues I will advocate are:

- Establishing a dedicated revenue stream for teacher's aides (and other non-teacher support staff). We should eliminate year-to-year fluctuations in support personnel. And, short of lowering class sizes or improving technology investments, teacher aides are the most effective way we can increase one-on-one student-teacher interaction.
- Overhauling the Joint Comprehensive Anti-Gang Initiative in coordination with Tim Henderson, the rest of the Board, and the City Council. The program needs to shift its focus towards diverting gang activity at the three junctures where it is most easily diverted, and Durham should be adopting best practices from other programs around the country.

7. On which committees do you want to serve?

There is no way to know with certainty which committees I would want, without knowing the composition of the 2013-2017 Board. When elected, I hope we will assess our collective skills, passions, and expertise before requesting committee appointments.

That being said,

- **The Social Services Board.** I intend to seek appointment to this Board, before any other. Fully understanding and advocating the reforms that DSS needs will require a long-term commitment to working from within. The first step is building both the trust and the relationships needed to implement change.
- **The Audit Oversight Committee.** I believe we need big reforms in many of the fundamental services of county government including. But the details of those reforms will be overwhelmingly complex. On the Audit Oversight Committee I will be able to do my job while learning the deepest intricacies of each part of the county organization. No other committee offers such great rewards to a dedicated Commissioner willing to work hard.
- **The Durham Tech Board of Trustees.** Durham Technical Community College dramatically underperforms compared to other NC community colleges with similar demographics and funding. Getting to the bottom of that problem will require careful study and involvement.

The Public Health Board comes in a close fourth for a dozen reasons related to early childhood health, public-private partnerships, social services integration, Duke, outside foundation grants, and fighting poverty.

The Library Advisory Board of Trustees comes in fifth for its own peculiar set of policy implications. Best I can tell, most of the trustees are oblivious to the upcoming need to reevaluate the library system's long-term strategic mission. E.g. Blockbuster and Hollywood Video were both library systems—and they're both bankrupt now.

When libraries were first established, books were incredibly expensive and hard to obtain. Now the marginal cost of another copy of an ebook is <1¢. I can buy a used copy of almost any book I want on Amazon for less than \$2, delivered free to my door. Libraries will still have an important roll to play in the 21st century. But we can't pretend it will be the same roll they played in the 19th and 20th. I wish these fundamental facts were taken into consideration during the massively expensive capital improvement of the regional library system during the last decade.

8. Would you use sales taxes to raise revenue and why or why not?

When I was younger, I believed that sales taxes were regressive, and thus bad. End of story.

Many of my liberal friends still hold this view, and to an extent it's true. I would never want to go to a flat-tax system. There is no realistic scenario where I would choose a regressive tax over a more progressive one (like income, property, capital gains, estate, etc).

But dogmatically sticking to opposition to regressive taxation ends up hurting the poor who we're trying to protect. The academic research shows that the total amount of tax revenue, and the way that revenue is allocated, are the only significant predictors of positive economic outcomes for families in the bottom income quintile. Total taxation revenue, not progressivity, allows for quality education, a strong safety net, public transit, and other programs that provide upward mobility. This is born out by numerous academic studies of smaller European countries and municipalities. Progressivity is especially not important at the margins (like a quarter cent sales tax increase).

This actually makes plenty of sense, once you stop to think about it. Imagine a regressive tax, like a prepared food tax. Even though it's much more regressive than a property tax, the overwhelming majority of the tax will still be paid by the rich. The next largest set of payers will be the middle class. Low income residents will only pay about 5% of the tax. But if the proceeds are put towards public education and community colleges, then low income residents will reap 75%+ of the benefit. The middle class will get back a bit more than they paid in. And the rich will still be taxed much more than they get back, just like in more progressive tax systems. In this sense, all taxation is progressive.

I do not mean to say that we should indiscriminately raise all taxes in order to generate more revenue. I'm also not advocating that we increase the sales tax right now, or implement a prepared food tax. Consumer taxes can also have significant impact on economic activity—e.g., a prepared food tax might crash our foodie economy, even if it helped our schools. But both all taxes within our statutory authority should be on the table.

There's also one more factor in considering sales tax, which is the baseline amount of taxation already in place, and the ways in which those taxes are generated. I heard a compelling argument from the NC Budget and Tax Center that having a diverse tax base is more important than having a progressive taxation policy. I haven't had time to research it as well as I would like. But the gist is that having a good mix of sales tax, property tax, use tax, and impact fees is important for maintaining a steady rate of service. For instance, when a recession hits, sales tax revenue will drop abruptly, but property tax will not. However, after a major property value reevaluation cycle, property

taxes could drop dramatically. In either scenario, having a more diverse tax base is preferable to having a more progressive one.

The shorter answer would have been: Yes, I will use the sales tax to raise revenue when appropriate. But I'm not blind to the fact that it is more regressive than other taxes within the county's statutory authority.

9. If the County Manager proposes a budget in which expenses are greater than revenues, should you vote to raise taxes or cut expenses? How will you decide?

There is no way to answer this question realistically. As a hypothetical, it's impossible.

Off the top of my head:

Did we run a surplus last year? How is our reserve fund? What is our current bond load? What are the current market rates? How is DPS's reserve fund looking? What are our upcoming outlay obligations in the next 2 years? Will any bonds be switching from interest only to principal next year? What is our bond rating? What is the current sales tax rate? Millage rate? Is the shortfall due to a structural change in State or Federal funding? Is it due to the withdrawal of one-time funds? What was GDP growth last year? Are we in a recession? If so, did we just enter the recession, or has it more than five quarters old? Did our revenue go down, or did our obligations go up? Are we projected to have this shortfall again next year, or is it temporary? Do Democrats have the majority in the Assembly?

I will weigh the answers to all those questions, and many others, before I decide.

I'm going to assume this question is actually,
"when you face the 10-20 million dollar shortfall next year, what will you do?"

The answer to that question is, I will find more money, and I'll find it wherever I have to. Assuming we're still limping through the last stages of the Great Recession, we can't afford to cut services again. To the extent we can, County economic policy needs to be counter-cyclical. That is, during bad economic times the County needs to spend more, not less.

We can accomplish this by building up reserves during good years, something the current Board didn't do enough of. We can also be more aggressive with our bonds. We built the courthouse thanks to the smart advice and actions of Mike Ruffin and Finance Director George Quick (and approval of the current Board, credit where it's due). But we should have been moving forward on other capital projects just as quickly in 2009 and 2010. Right now bond interest rates are at all time lows, and we have a AAA rating. Our county is growing and will continue to grow, but we're facing the prospect of cutting essential services.

To understand an analogous situation, imagine that I have a perfect credit score, very little credit card debt, and a practically limitless line of credit. I also have a good income, and I know that my income will rise every year for the rest of my life. Meanwhile, I have no cash in my pocket, no food in the house, and my kids are hungry. What should I do? Obviously I should borrow. It's not ideal, but it's the only real option. What if I had money in my savings account? Well, obviously I should use that first, and if it runs out I should borrow.

That's the situation we're in. In 2012 and 2013, we should spend down our reserves to the extent it is safe. We need to tell DPS to spend down their large reserves too. There isn't even an obvious credit-related reason for DPS to have those reserves, except as a hedge against mismanagement on the part of the County Board. (On second thought, I see why they might want the reserves).

After that, we should be issuing bonds that have already been passed. And we should got the voters for more bond authority, if necessary.

There are very few situations where I would advocate using bonds to supplement general fund obligations. But we're in a protracted recession marked by a liquidity trap in which real interest rates approach zero, with Republicans in Raleigh shutting down all manners of funding. There's practically no scenario I can imagine better suited to borrowing.

The worst thing that could happen is that we would drop from AAA to AA1. AA1 is still better than almost all other counties in the United States. And experience shows that we would regain our AAA rating quickly once the economy recovers. In the meantime, we wouldn't be issuing more bonds anyway, so the interest rate change caused by the downgrade would only affect us negligibly.

After the recession is over, we would need to replace bond funding with permanent revenue (i.e. taxes). When the economy starts booming again we will need to pay down our bonds, and start cutting waste from existing agencies. It is counterintuitive to most candidates (and Commissioners) but the time to cut spending is during a strong economy when tax revenues are high.

During the boom, we should also be building up a much larger reserve than we did before. During the last economic boom, we used the extra money to cut taxes repeatedly. Some of those property tax reductions were necessary. But if we had left taxes a little higher, and used the money to pay off bonds and build up larger reserves, we would have weathered this last recession much better.

Much shorter answer:

I will probably vote to raise revenue somewhat.

But if the economy is strong, I will likely vote to cut spending as well, or at least vote against dipping into the reserves.

And if the economy is weak, I will vote to use the reserves first, bonds second, and increase revenue as a last resort (and cut spending not at all).

10. What's the single greatest challenge facing the county today?

What is the single greatest challenge we're actually facing?

Or what is the greatest challenge we should be facing, but we're trying to ignore?

Any answers other than education and poverty are patently false. I wish transit, sustainability, historic preservation, and such were our biggest priorities, but they can't be. I care about lots of issues, both micro and macro. I care about protecting our natural resources, about our watershed, about 751-South. I care about our libraries, our transit policies, our developments, and our economic incentives.

But none of those matter, comparatively. To use a popular expression among the kids these days: #firstworldproblems.

I don't know how any candidate can answer anything except ending poverty and fixing education. Really, the only acceptable answer is poverty—except that fixing education is so intertwined with the systemic poverty we face that they go together.

If it were my daughter Annabelle attending Glenn or Y E Smith, I wouldn't care about curbing greenhouse gas emissions through sustainable transit. If it were my family that didn't have food security, or a permanent roof over my head... If I were unable to find a job, and most of my friends were unemployed... If that unemployment weren't personal, and temporal, but permanent and systemic—I wouldn't care about library renovations. I wouldn't care, even if the nice new library were in my neighborhood.

So how do we make poverty and education the top priority?

The answer is somewhere in Human Services, in Education, in the nonprofit and entrepreneurial sector, in economic development, and in crime abatement and treatment. In short—the answer is right there in the core services of County government.

I am going to, as succinctly as I can, elaborate on these aspects:

Schools.

Social services.

Early childhood-intervention.

Job training.

Public-private partnerships.

Crime.

DPS needs a major overhaul. It's going to have one, with or without the Board, because of the pass-through funds drying up and the new Charters pulling away so many students. But this time of crisis can also be a period of "creative destruction." That's how economists describe the good that can grow from breaking down previous ways of doing business.

But the Board doesn't set school policy, so I'll skip enumerating my several dozen other policy proposals (they're on my website, if you're interested).

DSS needs some big changes. I don't have as many specific policy proposals yet, because Social Services is actually in many ways more complex than the school system. I have several friends who are lawyers and social workers who work for and with Durham's DSS. They tell me horror stories of waste, abuse, negligence, and clinical detachment. Social Services should be the most human and humane face of County government, but it's the opposite. If you go sit in the DSS office downtown on any given day of the week, you'll know what I'm talking about immediately.

You will see migrant workers and day laborers sitting, holding tickets, faces filled with humiliation and failure. You will see tight-lipped mothers, some 18 years old, other 40, clutching tickets, rigid with fear. You might see a panicked Ecuadorian family attempting to communicate in Andean Spanish with an American DSS employee who learned Peninsular Spanish in Spain. They're panicked, because the two dialects can be essentially incomprehensible. You'll see men in collared dress shirts and ties, trying not to make eye contact. And you will see all this taking place in a sterile looking room with bright fluorescent lights, an armed guard, and employees sitting behind bulletproof glass.

All of that is a perfect microcosm for the current failures of Durham's DSS. We've turned the population receiving social services into statistics and clients, as if the service we're delivering is a flu vaccine or a McBurger.

Ideally, DSS should be tracking each person that ever walks through its doors, and treating knowing them as humans. Even people who come into DSS and are turned away because they're not eligible for foodstamps/wic/whatever, we should be keeping up with them too. Do you think anyone who walks through those doors doesn't need the help of the safety net? Each person who comes in should be meeting with a social worker who is taking their information, getting their consent forms, and evaluating them for mental health needs, physicals health, food security, housing security, etc. Complete educational and work histories should be taken, along with information about family members who might need help, religious affiliations and community groups who could assist, and more.

DSS social workers shouldn't just be connecting people to assistance 'programs.' They should be connecting people to support networks, nonprofits, educational opportunities, and more. This approach is more humane, more affective, and in the medium to long-term, it's less expensive. We would hear a lot less resentful grumblings about "welfare moms" if we were actually connecting most people who pass through those doors to ways they could become self sufficient again.

We need a major early-childhood intervention program. Some positive movement has been made on this front recently, especially in the public health arena. But many children, and mothers, need a safe place to go every day of the week starting just after

birth. Durham County can help create such a safety net, and the cost will be trivial compared to long-term benefit.

Any major program will take a combination of state or federal dollars, and public/non-profit partnerships to accomplish. The ideal is a program that ensures the healthy development of each at-risk child, and that helps mothers learn both job skills and successful parenting skills. The program needs to start near birth, and last until it transitions the entire family into pre-K.

With churches and other nonprofits providing the spaces, this kind of program can be accomplished by putting daycare for children in one room, and job training for mothers in the other room. For most of the mothers, the job training should be teacher's assistant pre-k training. Within a relatively short time frame, many of the women in these programs will be qualified to assist in the daycare room.

Similar programs already exist in other states. The overwhelming academic research says that early-childhood intervention is exponentially more effective than any other method of improving educational outcomes or fighting poverty.

Durham could eliminate all systemic poverty in 20 years, if we were really willing to put the resources down to do it. But what do we do with the poverty we have now, the impoverished culture, and the crime?

We need to rethink the way we're currently doing criminal bonds (and not, unfortunately, in the way that Commissioner Page and Mayor Bell have been advocating).

But the biggest complete change probably needs to be in our Anti-Gang initiatives. In 2011, I advocated fully-funding a youth-jobs program on behalf of DurhamCAN. A major factor in that advocacy was I did so because it's actually quite easy to divert low-level gang members into legal enterprises.

Street-corner gang members selling drugs are usually making no more money than they would make working the same hours at McDonalds. The current Anti-Gang program misses this fact, and related ones. Fighting gang participation requires understanding why people end up in gangs, and how they leave.

I don't have time or space to write it all down here, but you can ask me at the endorsement interview. Suffice it to say, that it's not clear whether anyone on the Board or working on that initiative has ever met someone in a gang, and it's not surprising that the program has zero verifiable results after several years and hundreds of thousands of dollars spent.

11. What would you propose, or personally commit to doing, as a way to improve

communication and collaboration among the members of the BOCC?

Social-dynamic research shows that the most effective way to improve a disfunction group simply to change its composition and insert more diversity. A more diverse set of voices will go a long way to improve Board relations, without any other major efforts. I, personally, pride myself on being able to discuss even contentious topics in a civil manner. Believe it or not, I actually have a friend who is a member of the Tea Party.

Side note: when looking at the list of email addresses of County Board members and candidates, I noticed something odd. The email services being used were all a decade out of a date (like @aol). The adoption of basic modern tools like gCal and Dropbox could go a long way towards improving communication and collaboration.

12. How much time do you devote / plan to devote each week to your County Commissioner duties and activities?

Durham needs full time Commissioners (and for that matter City Councilpersons). Until we can establish such a system, those who are willing to work the hardest will get the most done.

I will work full time, balanced with raising my daughter. As a young candidate, I am well suited to putting in such hours. I will have hundreds or even thousands of pages of reading to do each week, and I can do that from home. Constituent services can be done during normal business hours.

I could never work less than full time, because I know too well how much Durham needs to accomplish. If my working 10 less hours a week means an important public-private partnership isn't accomplished, and 20 children in poverty are never given a chance to succeed... that's the scenario that will keep me working late into the night.

13. Do you support changes to Durham County's billboard ordinance? Why?

I certainly don't support any expansion of the billboard ordinance. We don't need more, larger, brighter, or video billboards. I would actually support rolling back the number and size of the billboards we allow. The state of Texas had some success with this strategy several decades ago. They essentially capped the number of billboards allowed on state highways, and then they started buying back billboards and tearing them down.

Fundamentally, the principle goes down to public ownership of the commons. Those things we none of us own (like the air and the trees) belong to all of us. We allow coal plants to pollute our air somewhat, because we collectively derive benefit. We don't allow people to indiscriminately burn tires and such, because that pollutes our air without benefit. We license the public airwaves to TV stations, and the public radio waves to radio stations. Those stations run advertisements, but they do so primarily to support commercial programming that has broad public support.

So why exactly do we license billboards? We allow billboards to pollute the public visual space because, well, we want their money. But that doesn't seem like a compelling public interest argument to me.

I'm not sure if my position makes me conservative for believing in limited government, or liberal for believing in an activist government. But either way, less billboards would be a good thing.

14. When, if ever, it would be appropriate to “downzone” a parcel of property?

Downzoning is a tricky subject. Obviously, it is sometimes appropriate to downzone. The most frequent cause of downzoning is a neighborhood petition of some kind. And that’s where it gets tricky. Not all of the petitions should be granted, but making those choices is very difficult from the point of view of commissioners.

A 2011 paper by Schleicher and Hills argues that downzoning petitions are too often granted because, as individual projects, none of the changes appears to have a big impact. They propose what I think is a novel solution, a “zoning budget.”

The idea is that a certain amount of new development is necessary to match the rate of population growth. In order to keep the cost of housing low, you actually want to slightly exceed the rate of growth. Under the zoning budget plan, the Board would set its zoning-development goals for a one-or two year period. Throughout that timeframe, the Board would need to make sure it offsets each downs zoning was an up zoning in another area. If finding another area to up zone is difficult, then the cost-benefit on that downzoning petition should be reevaluated.

That being said, there are many many times when downzoning is appropriate. Sometimes the character of a neighborhood changes, and sometimes crime considerations play a part. Sometimes downzoning is used congruently with up zoning to intentionally shift economic activity away from a smaller street and towards a larger one. These are all appropriate examples of downzoning.

15. What can be done to improve public participation in the land use regulatory process?

Current County strategy when it comes public participation and assessing public opinion is disappointingly antiquated. At a recent gathering of BOCC candidates held by Mike Ruffin, several top County staff members bragged about the thousands of Durham residents who gave feedback on the new Comprehensive Plan.

Missing entirely from the conversation was the fact that the data collected was of very low quality. All of the feedback was collected through voluntary surveys, or from County staff, or through Townhalls.

There is an obvious problem with relying exclusively with these forms of feedback, namely, they all suffer from major selection bias. The average person who attends a Durham County advisory Townhall to discuss a revision to the Comprehensive Plan is dramatically different from an average Durham resident.

Townhall and committee attendees will skew disproportionately older, better educated, english-speaking, more likely to be retired, and more likely to be devoted to a niche issue. Meanwhile, many other groups are entirely missing from the Townhall forum. At a recent candidate Townhall, I asked people to raise their hand if they were Hispanic or Latino. In the whole audience of ~60 people, not a single hand went up.

By and large the following groups will never attend a Townhall: minimum wage workers, undocumented immigrants, young people, people involved in the counter culture (e.g. Durham's music scene), shift-workers, families without cars, single parents, the impoverished, people who do not read the newspaper and many more.

They all deserve some level of representation in the land use regulation process, but more importantly in all of County government.

I would never rely on faulty data when running a political campaign. I would never expect this type of feedback (known as a "convenience sample") from my pollster. No business would test a new marketing campaign this way, and we shouldn't rely on it for our county.

Somehow we've forgotten about the 70-year-old invention of public opinion polling. If we want to know what the priorities of Durhamites are, we should ask them directly. For about \$2000, Public Policy Polling in Raleigh will give us a much more accurate idea of what Durham thinks of something than we would get from a dozen townhalls.

This doesn't mean townhalls and surveys and such don't have a legitimate roll in the process. But we need to be much more aware of the extreme selection bias in who attends town halls, and aware of the fact that polling is both cheaper and more accurate.

How does this effect the way we improve public participation, and specifically participation in the land use regulatory process? It helps in two ways. If the people of Durham feel like the County is actually listening to them, I believe more of them will be inclined to participate.

Also, the most important group currently without a voice in land use regulation is actually Durham itself. The interests of developers, environmental concerns, and neighborhood groups, should all be weighed. But the interests and desires of the broader Durham community shouldn't be neglected.

16. Do you personally support or oppose the Constitutional Amendment which is on the ballot May 8? Please explain the reasons for your position.

I very passionately oppose the Amendment. I have spent the bulk of the last five months organizing against it, both locally and throughout the state. As an Executive Board member of the Young Democrats of North Carolina, I helped orchestrate immediate and forceful opposition to the Amendment beginning the day in September it was passed by the NC Senate.

In Durham, I have been an advisory committee member of the Duke Together coalition since its inception. Over the last five months, I have helped the Coalition develop political strategy, advised them on campaign finance law, and connected them with fundraising resources, training materials, and voter lists.

There is no legal, moral, or Christian excuse for discrimination.

I do not think anyone should need to explain the reasons why they stand for basic human dignity and equality.

17. Would you support the Durham BOCC adopting a resolution taking a position on the Marriage Amendment which is on the ballot May 8? What position should the BOCC take?

I think it is disgraceful that the BOCC has not yet taken a public position on the Amendment. It is a black mark against our County that a resolution was not passed expediently, and that the position was not a unanimous and strongly worded position against the Amendment.

18. Have you ever been convicted of any crime other than a minor traffic offense (like speeding)? If the answer is 'yes,' please describe the circumstances and the outcome.

No.

19. How long have you been a registered Democrat? For whom did you vote in the Presidential Elections of 2000, 2004, and 2008?

I have been a registered Democrat since literally the first day I was eligible to register*. I supported Gore in 2000, I was a Kerry state organizer in '04, and I voted for Obama in 2008

**For the purposes of a voter registration drive in 2006, I had to switch my registration to Unaffiliated for about 2 weeks. Feel free to ask me about it in person sometime; it's a funny story. We broke a voter registration record, and at the end of the drive, I switched back.*