



Questionnaire for Mayor and City Council Candidates 2021

Candidate Name: AJ Williams

Date: 8/17/21

Position Sought: City Council, Ward 3

What is your ideal vision for Durham? How will your leadership in elected office get us there?

My leadership will always reflect the needs and priorities of the people. I'm committed to being a public servant, not led by ego and political gain. Democratic leadership is fulfilled by practicing deep, active listening to the people. My vision begins with a practice of public safety that is people-centered, where the mental wellness of our residents is a priority, and where we are making significant investments in community-led models that keep us safe.

For several years, I've been committed to addressing safety and wellness in our city through my community organizing work, and I have co-led efforts to secure wins that affect the everyday lives of our people. As a member of Durham's Participatory Budgeting Steering Committee for the past two years, I've had direct access to the challenges that feel most pressing to Durham residents and the creative solutions they want to build. Each of the tenets in my vision for Durham is about what it means for people to truly feel safe. As a city council member, I will advocate for stronger investment in well-lit streets with sidewalks in every neighborhood; bus shelters; safe and affordable housing; unarmed care responders for crisis calls; and livable wages.

My vision is to continue to keep our growing community rooted in the culture that makes Durham so Durham. I envision a city where everyone is in safe, sustainable, desirable, and affordable housing. A city with free public transportation. Tree canopies restored in

historically Black neighborhoods to offset the ramifications of climate change, and expansion of green infrastructure in poor communities to counteract rising energy costs. City initiatives for free trade certifications in technologies and vocations for lower-income residents to reduce the wage gap. Assistance to small businesses to convert to worker-owner models for long-term sustainability and worker protections. Accountability for developers who are coming to our city to profit from the growth, without consequence for contributing to the displacement of long-time homeowners.

My vision for Durham is informed by remembering our past. I ground myself in the multiplicity of legacies our city offers us. First, honoring being on the ancestral lands of the Eno, and of the Occaneechi Band of the Saponi people. Honoring the progress of Black folks in building Black Wall Street. Honoring our rich organizing history confronting urban renewal, slum lords, and poverty. Honoring Durham's vibrant West African dance and drum community that I grew up in. Honoring ancestors who made their home in Durham, like Rev. Dr. Pauli Murray, Ms. Ann Atwater, and Baba Chuck Davis. Our city has always brought together a rich amalgam of differences across race and class, and when we've gotten it right, we've been able to address power and connect meaningfully across those differences.

What do you think is the biggest challenge Durham is currently facing and how would you address it?

We have a housing crisis in Durham. While our city has experienced tremendous growth over the last two decades, out-of-town developers have been able to capitalize on the culture that the city has to offer while the long-time residents who make Durham a brilliant gem in the South are being consistently displaced. Coming from a family that has survived eviction in Durham, I know firsthand that our families are resourceful and resilient in the face of adversity. I use the expression "houselessness" to describe the experience of being unhoused, recognizing that people without houses are still making home. With rising property taxes and lower and mid-income renters facing houselessness as local and national eviction moratoriums are lifted every few months, we need better long-term solutions that address the availability of affordable housing options. The supply of market-rate homes is low, with opportunistic investors sweeping up everything on the market, paying outrageous due diligence fees and making home-buying for new families immensely difficult if not impossible.

The lack of accountability from private investors and developers, aggressively descending on the city with quick property grabs, has gotten out of control. I'll be

working to encourage prospective developers to pay it forward and contribute to the Affordable Housing Investment Plan, and also encourage developers that have financially benefited over the past two decades to contribute a percentage of profits retroactively. The funds from that program would go towards existing city initiatives and funding entities like the Durham Community Land Trust (DCLT) and Habitat for Humanity to build market-rate, and below market-rate homes for qualifying residents.

There is also an ever-growing disparity for residents who are right at or under the median household income in Durham, which was \$60,958 in 2019 according to the United States Census Bureau. That number is likely to grow, and middle income housing residents will continue to be priced out as rentals increase with corporations like Apple and Google coming to the area. The decision to invite these mega corporations to the Triangle came from the state, but a strategic plan that will keep Durham residents stably housed will require cooperation between Durham City and County leadership.

Last year, rents increased in a six month period by 34%. The average rent for a one bedroom apartment in Durham in March, 2020 was \$995. Six months later, that cost increased to \$1,333.* What's happening in Durham is evidence of growing income and wealth inequality, where lower and middle class residents are priced out and left holding the bag.

There are a number of existing programs to reduce the number of people experiencing homelessness that have gotten funding from the City. I believe we can budget for more multi-year investments for organizations leading work around Rapid Re-Housing and Emergency shelter, but I'd also like to work towards developing longer term solutions that sets folks up to be placed in more stable housing situations by supporting them with free job certification training, subsidized housing options, employment opportunities, and ongoing mental health support.

On a longer term basis, we need publicly-funded, community-controlled, high-quality housing solutions. Durham voters demonstrated overwhelming support for the \$95 million Affordable Housing Bond referendum. Now we need to ensure we have elected representation willing to fight for the commitments made in the affordable housing plan.

*<https://indyweek.com/news/durham/pandemic-apartment-rent-spikes-durham/> Apartment Rents Shot Up More in Durham the Last Six Months Than Anywhere Else in the Country.

There has been a nation-wide push to extend the federal eviction moratorium that was due to end last month. More than 11 million people across the US were at

risk of being evicted from their homes if the moratorium had not been extended until October 2021. Many residents in Durham will still be in jeopardy of being evicted in October 2021 if the moratorium is not extended again. What protections will you push for to ensure that residents are able to stay in their homes, despite state preemption laws? What would you do to support those who are in need of financial assistance?

On a federal level, we need an eviction moratorium that will last at least until the COVID-19 pandemic is over. We need that moratorium to mean an actual pause on rent and utilities for all those who need it, not just accumulation of rent and utility debt for low-income people. I will be advocating for a City and County partnership for a moratorium on evictions and foreclosures, pursuant to Durham's emergency powers, as we are in a State of Emergency, continuing to survive the developing coronavirus variants. We know that our city's houseless/homeless residents are less protected from exposure to COVID-19, and it's imperative that we keep as many folks housed and safe as possible while we weather this storm.

The inconsistency on the federal level on implementing longer-lasting eviction moratoriums means that landlords can decide the fate for millions experiencing housing instability once those moratoriums expire. Our City government has the power to stand with residents, building trust by standing in the gap with protections that don't come through on the federal level. We can expect to see resistance (and possible threats of litigation) from some landlords, but that cannot serve as a reason to neglect the needs of tenants.

I'd also like to see an expansion of the Durham Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP) which will pay up to 12 months rent for renters experiencing hardships. The program requires that landlords not evict tenants for 60 days, and I want to ensure that this protection is honored by holding landlords accountable.

In 2019, we were able to win additional funding towards Legal Aid's Eviction Diversion program, and so we'll see some 800 households assisted on an annual basis, with funding of \$500k from the City.²

On an equally relevant note, the federal government is in the process of distributing funds to states and cities that are intended to bring relief during the pandemic, more public investment than we've seen since the New Deal. As City Councilmember, I pledge to make sure that money benefits the majority of us, including essential workers and frontline communities, rather than being misused to profit irresponsible landlords,

unjust employers, wealthy corporations, or policing and jails.

2. <https://durhamnc.gov/3932/Affordable-Housing-Bond>

Durham has been identified as the city with the second-biggest rent increase across the country, with a 46.8 percent jump year-over-year. (data based on two-bedroom apartments across the U.S.-Triangle Business Journal) What are your plans to ensure affordable housing for ALL residents moving forward? In addition to more affordable housing what are the measures you think need to happen to ensure affordability in Durham regarding renters?

Unfortunately, North Carolina is one of the few states that has banned rent control, but the Durham Housing Authority is obligated by HUD to ensure that rents are stabilized for our lower-income residents. The Affordable Housing Bond has introduced DHA-sponsored projects to renovate existing low-income properties including JJ Henderson, Oldham Towers and Liberty Street Apartments, among others.³

While there are existing tenant protections in place for public housing, including right of return, and rent stabilization, one of the big issues with the semi-privatized, mixed-use, RAD (Rental Assistance Demonstration) conversion units, is that private developers and funders that are benefiting from the tax credits have no hand in the day to day operations and maintenance of these properties. Additionally, residents will be displaced and relocated indefinitely as the renovation projects work through multiple phases of completion.⁴

I'm committed to making sure that DHA is held accountable every step of the way, providing long-term protections for tenants and exercising equitable practices and communication concerning relocation during property renovations. I'd also like to create more opportunities for Housing Choice (Section 8) vouchers to be accepted by a wider swathe of private property-owners to get the waiting lists under control.

I will be in consistent communication with the Affordable Housing Implementation Committee to see that there is solid follow-through on the Investment Plan.

3. <https://durhamnc.gov/3932/Affordable-Housing-Bond> Affordable Housing Investment Plan Updates 4.
<https://www.durhamhousingauthority.org/rad/> Rental Assistance Demonstration Program

5. The historically Black communities of Braggtown, Merrick Moore, and Walltown are being threatened by displacement due to private investment and

development. What resources and support can the City deploy to help longtime residents resist the negative impact of these developments? (Question submitted by Walltown Community Association)

I will work towards expanding the City's current Longtime Home-Owner Grant Program to include more targeted areas, and reduce the family size average median income to account for homeowners who may not have the income to support paying the rising property taxes. Such a situation may be an instance where a long-time homeowner with health problems passes away, leaving other family members to inherit deferred maintenance costs and the inability to pay the annual property tax bill, and they end up losing their home.

Reparations include undoing past harms and creating opportunities for Black people to build communal resources over multiple generations. Often home-ownership is a cornerstone step in that direction, and it has historically been an obstacle due to geographic segregation, redlining, and wealth inaccessibility.

While the City has committed to \$700,000 out of a total of \$950K in repairs to homes owned by elders and differently-abled households as part of our Affordable Housing Investment Plan, I'd like to also see the city provide matching funds for programs like the Preservation Equity Project, which provides grants in the amount of \$1000-\$6500 towards maintenance and repair for homeowners in historic districts in the city, like Walltown, Braggtown and Merrick Moore.⁵I will advocate for renovations that not only bring a higher external perceived value, but cover the cost of structural improvements like roofing, HVAC, insulation repairs and energy efficient retrofitting with solar panels and Energy Star appliances.

5. <https://preservationdurham.org> Preservation Equity Project

The majority of City Council's power lies in zoning. What are your ideas around equitable zoning? How will you implement them?

In 2019, City Council approved an amendment to its Unified Development Ordinance, giving property owners permission to add multiplex and ADU's (Accessory Dwelling Units) in single family residential areas. This increase of supply to respond to the high demand would allow for higher density and developers would reap benefits in the form of bonuses, as a trade off for providing low income units. Without critically sound oversight, this could



potentially mean bigger high-end developments for the sake of a few affordable housing units, and a question of whether the means justifies the end.

If done right, the original intention would be a significantly positive outcome--- to undo the racist and classist harms of Single Family, low-density zoning which historically has meant less options for people across a spectrum of income and family types (or more simply put, disproportionately affecting Black, Brown and low-income communities who can't access these home types).

The challenge is that Durham does not have inclusionary zoning, which would require developers to allocate a percentage of units as low-income. The density bonuses to developers would theoretically counteract this.

Since the 1950s, Black people have been excluded from being able to purchase homes or securing federally insured mortgages, due to redlining, and there is clear evidence of the geographical segregation that still haunts our city when many majority Black neighborhoods pre 1980s, were up-zoned to heavy commercial and industrial use, causing major degradation of communities as a result, and lowering property values.⁶

Zoning reform in the form of density redevelopment, could bring about a significant change in the volume of affordable housing, but we need to keep our eye on significant environmental impacts as noted in the Expanded Housing Choices Memo (TC1800007, September 3, 2019), including 'impact to tree canopies' and increased impervious surfaces, which result in impeding of 'infiltration into the soil,' more stormwater runoff and flooding, and potential for contamination of water sources.⁷ There is a lot we can learn from frameworks like *Just Transition*, which focuses on moving away from extractive economies to regenerative ones, and paying attention to the ways gentrification and urban planning often run parallel to environmental racism.⁸

While there have been named remedies such as directing downspouts to pervious areas, and "maintaining or planting 2 trees," it feels necessary that our City's Planners keep on their radar the ways that historically marginalized groups are affected by making early interventions that prevent harm through inequitable zoning practices. I think solely focusing on the urban core of Durham without assessing land use and

zoning reform in suburban areas would overlook the history of white flight and suburban sprawl.

As City Councilmember, I will work towards developing a wider array of land use options in alignment with the Unified Development Ordinance amendment staff recommendations and the Planning Commission to “consider the suburban tier”, with heavy scrutiny on developer incentives, to create more opportunities for affordable housing, combined with equitable planning practices.

6. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01944363.2017.1320949> Racial and Class Bias in Zoning: Rezoning Involving Heavy Commercial and Industrial Land Use in Durham (NC) in 1945-2014.

7. https://durhamnc.gov/DocumentCenter/View/27597/CC_EXPANDING-HOUSING-CHOICES-MEMO Expanding Housing Choices Memo, Sept 3, 2019 8. <https://climatejusticealliance.org/just-transition/> Just Transition, a Framework for Change

Durham For All and Durham Beyond Policing collaborated on our 10 to Transform campaign earlier this year. Our demand to City Council was to transfer 60 vacant officer positions in the Durham Police Department (DPD) to a new Department of Community Safety and Wellness (DCSW) and hire unarmed professionals to respond to traffic and mental health crisis calls. The City Council reallocated 5 positions from DPD to the DCSW and froze 15 more in DPD, with an affirmative vote needed in January to reallocate them to DCSW. Do you commit to fulfilling our 10 to Transform demand and vote to reallocate those 15 frozen positions to the DCSW in January 2022? Would you vote to reallocate 20 more vacancies each year for the next two years? Why or why not?

I am absolutely committed to fulfilling this demand as a City Council member. I was integrally involved in the 10 to Transform Campaign as a Durham Beyond Policing organizer in collaboration with Durham for All. Profoundly shifting the way we think about investments in community safety, and reducing the footprint of the Durham Police Department is among my top priorities as a Council member.

In 2019, Durham Beyond Policing, a coalition that I've been actively involved with for the past 4 years, put forth a Community-led Safety & Wellness Task Force Proposal, where we called for City and County funding to support deeper, community-led structural solutions to the issue of public safety. We won the approval of the Taskforce in a 4-3 vote, and simultaneously won \$15/hr for part time city workers, increased funding toward the Eviction Diversion program, and blocked 72 additional police officers from being added to the force over 3 years.

From an organizer's standpoint, having a progressive council greatly opens up possibilities for what our movements can advance on the municipal level. Being able to work with electeds who have their ear to the street, and who are in consistent communication with grassroots organizations makes it far less difficult to get our communities' needs met. As soon as I'm sworn-in, reallocating the 15 positions to the Department of Community Safety and Wellness will be at the top of my to-do list. I trust and expect our community to hold me accountable every step of the way to make sure this happens.

I am also fully committed to staying on a path where 20 additional vacancies are reallocated over the next two years. In my platform, I mention creating a City-funded initiative within the Department of Community Safety and Wellness to hire Durham residents from impacted neighborhoods to be Care Responders. We have got to get more buy-in from community members by having conversations about what we need to keep each other safe, without police being the sole solution. Unarmed Care Responders will be skilled de-escalators of conflict. We've seen this work in cities with similar models, including Atlanta's Policing Alternatives and Diversion Initiative, which includes a built in non-emergency dispatch number for quality of life service calls, and a Harm Reduction Team that takes referrals for addressing basic needs for individuals who may be experiencing substance use, extreme poverty, or mental health crisis, without creating a police report or immediate arrest.⁹

I believe we can implement a unarmed skilled care responder model rooted in Bull City culture here in Durham, and make our local contribution to the national political movement calling for more investment in alternatives, and decriminalizing behaviors committed as a result of poverty, mental health crisis, substance use or other social ills, and moving away from the devastating effects of over-policing Black and Brown communities.

9. <https://www.atlantapad.org/> Policing Alternatives and Diversion Initiative

During our 10 to Transform campaign, there were deep conversations with our community and elected officials about what safety looks like for our community. The uptick in gun violence was a consistent thread in many of these conversations, with many different views around how we address the gun violence in our city. What are your strategies to address the gun violence in Durham? How would you ensure that Durham has safe communities?

Gun violence is not a new heartbreaking challenge for Durham. I grew up in the Durham that was featured in the 2007 documentary, *Welcome to Durham*, about cycles of violence in small cities. I have lost loved ones and peers to gun violence. I have seen the ways that being surrounded by gun violence demoralized us, and caused trauma.

Every summer, there is an uptick in gun violence, closely followed by an uptick in calls to expand policing and fill the jails (in spite of the fact that policing is often part of the gun violence problem). Additionally, there is no conclusive research that shows police officers decrease homicides, violence or “crime.” We need long-term solutions, and we need directly-impacted community members to have a say in those solutions or they won’t be successful or sustainable. We need unprecedented cooperation within and across municipal leadership bodies, to really prioritize an end to the gun violence that is breaking our hearts, tearing apart our communities, and forcing our children to live in fear.

I played a key role in co-authoring the proposal for a Community-Led Safety and Wellness Task Force and why we brought it to the City, County, and School Board. The Durham Community Safety and Wellness Task Force was created to examine the public safety and wellness needs of Durham residents and create recommendations for transformation. From this intergenerational body of community leaders, we can expect to see recommendations that include visions for police-free schools where youth, school workers, and educators are given the tools and space to address conflict and support students as whole people. We will see recommendations for violence interruption work that connects with residents peer-to-peer to increase interpersonal skill, address conflict, and transform harm, inside longer-term relationship building and support. We will see recommendations for unarmed skilled care responders who residents can call when there is a crisis. And we will see recommendations for structural transformation tackling our system of courts and jails. As a City Councilmember, I could advocate to strengthen and expand the Department of Community Safety that was created to implement the Community Safety and Wellness Task Force recommendations.

As a City Councilmember, I pledge to annually allocate resources towards the aspects of our City budget that play significant roles in preventing gun violence: affordable housing, public transportation, jobs, youth programs, arts, and parks and recreation (along with cooperating with the School Board and County on expanding public education, healthcare access, libraries, and social services).

In March 2020, bus fares were suspended on public buses in Durham, Raleigh, and Cary. This freeze on fares has now been extended until June 2022. What's your plan for continued affordable transit in our city?

Keeping public transit free or low-cost is a top priority for me. I would also expand bus routes to make it easier to get across town efficiently. Fare-free public transit has significantly increased ridership and will continue to do so.

Due to increasing cases of Covid-19 and the spread of the different variants, there is a possibility of another shutdown. Many people faced financial hardships during the last shutdown. How would you support workers if there is another shutdown? What measures do you think the City should take in responding to the ongoing emergence of Covid-19 variants?

I'm imagining hazard pay for essential workers, medical grade masks (N95, KN95) for all employees, emergency financial assistance, extended sick leave and the option to work from home where available, the institution of wellness days, staggered attendance at work for essential workers, and exploring options for expanding childcare access.

Participatory Budgeting is one example of how elected officials can democratize the powers of their office. If you are elected, what is another example of how you would share your power and give more people in the community the ability to make decisions that directly impact them?

As a City Council Member, I want to ensure that every process or initiative that the city introduces involving community has opportunities for Durham residents to provide input, consultation, advice and implementation during every phase of the project. As a member of the Participatory Budgeting Steering Committee, the most rich experiences emerge when our budget delegates (members of the community appointed to gather community input, and ideas) have been invited to actively participate in the process. Budget Delegates represent a spectrum of Durham's community, across race, class and gender.

There are opportunities for our new Department of Community-led Safety and Wellness to build a framework for community members to provide valuable participation during civic engagement, that ensures government is not just happening to us, but with us.

Not all people who give birth or become pregnant are women. Do you support birthing people's right to choose? Why or why not?

Absolutely. I am a strong advocate of honoring all types of family structures, and honoring the right to not make family at all. I'm the co-parent to two beautiful children, in a strong, loving family structure. We are most in our power when we push back against the social conditions that say conformity is required for us to exist in our own bodies and kinship structures.

I believe in personal agency and consent culture, and giving prospective parents, no matter what body they are in, the right to make those personal decisions is right and necessary. I'm interested in building the social supports needed to make it possible for differently-abled, trans, gender non-conforming, femme and women-identified folks to stand in their agency and make family however we see fit, and for all families to thrive and have equitable access to a rich quality of life.

Our local elected bodies need to share a collective vision and work together for education for all Durham students. Do you believe Durham needs more charter schools? Why or Why not?

As a K-12 alum of Durham Public Schools and as a DPS parent, I know the socio-economic and developmental benefits of quality public education. Public schools protect the rights of all children to receive a free education, and is one of the lasting social institutions that works.

While I do have some critiques of our school system, I stand in solidarity with teachers who are absolutely essential to our social structures, as they have taught in challenging conditions, prioritizing the care and learning of our children particularly during the pandemic, even as attendance rates have dropped due to virtual learning being an obstacle around accessibility.

More and more, we're seeing corporate interests seep into education, with the goal of controlling education through the private sector. The threat of losing public tax dollars, access to education for all school-aged children, and worsening conditions and structural needs of schools are some of the reasons we need to push back against privatization, and invest in public education.

Holding elected office requires one to make hard choices. If elected, who (please

be specific) will you turn to for insight and support in counseling you in tough times?

As a community organizer, I have observed the challenging choices that our local electeds have to make, and as City Councilmember, I would deeply value the trust vested in me by Durham residents to make decisions with care. I have a really amazing team of folks I would rely on for insight and support, made up of family, movement elders, friends, and colleagues who have offered support, hugs, long walks, and porch sits.

I will name a few loved ones here, and I recognize with heartfelt gratitude the many I didn't name. Pierce Freelon, our current Ward 3 Councilmember, has offered to mentor and support in the capacity of advisor along this journey. Danielle Purifoy, a good friend and organizer with Durham Beyond Policing. My partner and co-parent, Manju Rajendran, who has been supportive on every level. Dee Dee Jackson, a long-time friend and amazing strategic mind who I know through our shared work with Black Youth Project 100 (BYP100). Quisha Mallette, attorney, friend, and member of Southerners On New Ground. My mother, who always provides a bit of healthy skepticism and loving perspective. And the Creator, who guides me to stay in alignment with my purpose.