



Questionnaire for Mayor and City Council Candidates 2021

Candidate Name: Elaine M. O'Neal

Date: 8/18/2021

Position Sought: Mayor

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

My ideal vision for Durham is a city that is united and equitable for all. It would be a Durham that is safe for all and has opportunities for each individual to dream and achieve whatever life goals they have. I envision a Durham where our children are excited about learning and going to all schools that prepare them well for their life's journey. I envision a Durham where all young people have a clear career path that is easy to navigate and achievable with mentors to help along the way. I envision a Durham where crime is low and almost nonexistent so that police become unarmed peacekeepers. Where neighbors are able to afford the neighborhoods and communities of their choice. Communities that are inclusive, safe and attractive. I envision a Durham that is clean and beautiful; where public art is a part of our fabric. Our streets are paved, sidewalks, bike trails and other amenities are in all neighborhoods. A Durham where there are no food deserts, food swamps or neighborhoods that are impoverished. A Durham where neighbors help neighbors and we make a commitment to have ongoing conversations with each other to solve problems, prevent discrimination and set goals for our city that are based in equity. I am a Durhamite, having never lived anywhere but Durham. I love this city and the people, who are all my neighbors. I have had the benefit of watching Durham grow into the thriving city that it is. But we are far from the vision that I have set out above. I believe that I can help to unify the now fragmented city that we have. I have never seen Durham so economically, politically and socially fragmented. We have grown but not grown together. There are many voices and all are important. There is room at the table for all ideas and for all visions of an "ideal" Durham. My skillset and experiences have allowed me to participate in stabilizing public agencies that were on the brink or in the midst of disruption. In my leadership roles, I was able to stabilize and move those agencies in positive directions. I believe that I can help to unify Durham City and County to move us in a direction that is positive, inclusive, inviting and fulfilling for all of its residents.

Once I am elected, I fully expect to spend time developing a shared vision of council that will govern the next steps towards our dreams becoming a reality with a full assessment and understanding of how we can be the best Durham for everyone.

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

I believe that poverty, crime and the collateral consequences resulting from poverty are the biggest challenges facing Durham. There are other issues that connect to those issues which are equally important, such as affordable housing, the achievement gap and lack of income and job opportunities. It is all connected.

I believe that we must first assess where we are across the city in terms of identifying our needs; especially the needs of our most distressed communities. We should understand at a neighborhood level what the needs are and engage residents directly in those conversations. There is a lot of distrust of government within our most distressed communities and we must seek to rebuild trust and establish relationships. We can support our neighbors in assessing their strengths and the needs of our neighborhoods. We should send in our “helping” agencies, which include social services, mental health, public health, and nonprofits in a team manner that will work daily in our communities to establish goals based on what the communities say they need.

My highest priority would be to rebuild trust and assess the needs at the street level in our most distressed communities with the residents leading the way.

Similar to my leadership on the Racial Equity Task Force, I would devise a plan to develop specific recommendations from the community led teams so that we can all work on the challenges ahead together.

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?

I would seek to make sure that the process for getting the assistance that has been given by our government is streamlined and efficient. The primary complaint that I have heard is that the assistance is there, but it takes months to get it. Also, there have been complaints that the system is not user friendly. I would also work with the courts, law enforcement and all those who are defending the rights of tenants to make sure that tenants are aware of their rights and have legal representation.

There are many working already to study the laws around eviction to see where we can push for changes that support our local residents.

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?

I believe we can build on the work of the current council and former elected officials who have laid the groundwork for addressing the affordable housing crisis with the housing bond and ongoing community work happening with the Coalition for Affordable Housing and Transit, Durham Community Land Trustees, and others. We are on the right track to address the

problems still facing Durham on the affordable housing issues. However, the issues are complex and connected with poverty, the lack of job opportunities, skills gaps, and justice related issues. The problems must be addressed at a base level of equity for everyone that changes systems both nationally and here in Durham for our youth, children and seniors specifically.

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*)

The City has an obligation to explain to its residents being affected by displacement with private investment exactly what the city can and cannot do. The City can also better identify which areas of Durham are in the best position for density and possible sites for development early in the long range planning process. In the city's long range planning process, we need to continue to highlight those voices that have not traditionally been included at each step. The planning process has to be viewed using an equity lens. Those closest to the pain must be closest to the power.

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

I first believe that we all must understand that power and the collateral consequences in invoking that power. Zoning laws must be understood and placed under an equity lens. In the work of the Racial Equity Task Force, we address the need for an equity tool kit so that policy makers can center equity in the work rather than as an add on.

Durham For All and Durham Beyond Policing collaborated on our 10 to Transform campaign earlier this year. Our demand to the 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?

It would depend on the success of the unarmed responder approach. If it is successful, I would be willing to support additional transfers. However, I do believe we need to take a look at frontloading resources in our communities, especially those in distress, on a daily basis to eliminate some of the needs on the back end in partnership with community and other government agencies outside of law enforcement.

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?

Keeping the most important part of the gun violence prevention strategy central, we have to let residents lead in finding the solutions. In our hurting communities, we must first build trust in the government. I believe my approach would incorporate a team strategy including county and city government agencies along with community non-profits, who will have daily contact with residents in our most distressed communities. One of the key issues we fail to recognize is that there are young people who are convicted felons throughout Durham. These young people are currently invisible in our public housing system and often homeless. The younger the age of conviction, the more prolonged the collateral consequences have impact. We need to find housing and other resources for them. We have to stabilize their housing needs and other thriving needs.

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?

I believe we have to continue the moratorium on bus fares for now as we develop a Gap System. The Gap System could be comprised of private and community organizations such as churches, civic groups or others, to support our transit dependent riders. During the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Black people were very skilled at figuring out how to navigate their transit needs without the use of the public transportation system. We need to bring the same ingenuity to fill the gap in our city's transit needs, as we continue to build on strategies for long term solutions.

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 believe that conversations with those workers and business owners need to happen now. The workers and business owners should be involved in ongoing dialogues with the city and a strategic plan mapped out in the event we have to shut down. The City should clearly state what the city can and can do, but should leverage its resources to benefit those affected. I also believe that we should continue to encourage vaccinations and follow mask protocols. We are fortunate to have great medical institutions locally and continued conversations with them is a must.

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?

I will work to ensure that community residents are included in the process of governance at the

the ground level. Especially those whose voices that have traditionally not been lifted. For example, our young people should have a place at all tables and not just one young person. I will look for ways to involve more working residents into the process by trying to address needs for childcare to attend meetings, transportation or parking needs, and times for meetings that work for most of our neighbors.

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

Yes, I support birthing people's right to choose. Each person has the absolute right to choose to become a parent. My motto is "keep your morals off my body".

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?

I support the Durham Public Schools Foundation's work. I believe that Durham needs all of our schools to be great. Our schools all need funding to provide our students with the best education possible, irregardless of charter, public or private.

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?

I will turn to those who have been on the council before, my trusted mentors and others. I will always turn to my neighbors from all sectors of Durham and find as many voices as possible, who may be affected by decisions to be made. I will turn to the great teaching institutions here, NCCU, Duke University, and Durham Tech. I also have a group of experts in different areas of the law. I also turn to my personal circle, even if our views may differ.