



Questionnaire for Mayor and City Council Candidates 2021

Candidate Name: Leonardo Williams

Date: 8/18/2021

Position Sought: City Council, Ward 3

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

A vision that I share with my community is for a united Durham that provides safety and prosperity for all. That includes addressing issues of housing, community safety, land use, economic development, environment, public infrastructure, and racial equity. I'd like to see everyone equipped to create their own legacy here in Durham.

I would like to ensure that people who want to live here can afford to live here. People who want to spend here can afford to spend here. Folks who want to walk, play, dine, and enjoy our Bull City culture can do so safely. I envision a Durham where we create avenues to proudly display our local talent; decorating our city with masterpieces from local artists. I envision a Durham where we clearly understand what is possible for all of us.

Together, we can all define what a decent quality of life means to each of us. As a city council, we must create infrastructures and policies that promote livable wages, healthcare, childcare, and accessible transit. We have a pilot program that is setting the groundwork for a universal basic income program, but that's just a start. We can build further!

For too long, national organizations and corporations have driven our local way of life. I'm a grassroots practitioner who understands that we are greater when we work together. Relationships are key to successful and democratic governance. In my career as an educator, administrator, and small business owner, I have developed relationships across Durham and the greater Triangle area. We need perspectives and ideas from different sectors of our community. And we, of course, need to be in touch with those who have been most affected, exploited, and marginalized. There are experts throughout our community. I value all of them. The most engaging and equitable way of solving issues is to solve them with people.

I understand, honor, and appreciate the power of relationships.

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

The issues that are facing our city are all connected. Housing, community safety, and the pandemic are top priorities in Durham right now. However, we must understand the root causes that lie deep in the fabric of our city first: economic mobility.

It is increasingly difficult for residents in Durham to find financial prosperity. Without it, people cannot access basic necessities like food, healthcare, and shelter. Ultimately, we have to admit this can lead to despair, which often leads to the crime that our city is witnessing. We have a responsibility to make sure that the people who live here should not merely live to survive; they should prosper and succeed.

A few approaches that I have practiced when I was a teacher to now as a small business owner are as follows:

Public Safety

Short Term: Fund organizations who are currently performing direct engagement to curb crime at a rate that truly reflects the need.

- The current annual cost to incarcerate a person in NC is at \$30K. The annual cost of education at Durham Tech is just under \$2K. Trade jobs earned at a community college are now paying well over six figures.
- At an equal rate, for every 10 people we incarcerate, Durham could actually invest in a new startup that could produce millions of dollars back into the economy here locally.

Mid Term: Establish a city-wide apprenticeship program for high school juniors and seniors with startups and local businesses throughout Durham.

- Durham's high school graduation rate is 86%. Students who are not going to college, work, or military, are most impacted.
- The average age of serious crime contributors are in their 20s. Their lives have barely started.
- We can expand "Extended School Day" services sponsored by the City of Durham.

Long Term: Establish a legitimate emergency response corps for nonviolent offenses. ● Data driven decision making on the allocation of resources and funding for mental health and public safety.

Prosperity

Short Term: Establish a robust Small Business Sustainability and Success Program. ●

Expand, evolve and innovate the Office of Economic & Workforce Development to be reflective of Durham's small business sector.

- Execute a post-COVID feasibility study on the state of Durham's small businesses.
- Provide parking credits for Small Business employees.

Mid Term: Establish a Venture Capital firm in partnership with Durham Chamber to encourage and support economic creativity and mobility.

- Growing Durham from within, strengthening on city with our local talent.
- Assertively increase job opportunities and household sustainability.

Long Term: Durham as an entrepreneur.

- Identify and purchase under-utilized properties to expand innovation and opportunity.
- Increase public-private partnerships for commercial and residential expansion with community-centered design.
- Increase our affordable housing inventory.

Here's my commitment Housing Durham: A Four Prong Approach

1. Enhance the diversification of Durham's housing model to incorporate additional multi-use properties not only as a means to attract more tenants, but also to leverage the value of public housing (e.g, DHA's RAD conversation) while simultaneously improving the quality of living conditions for Durham's public housing residents.
2. Continue to invest in a robust Evictions Diversion Program to establish universal right to counsel for those who are facing evictions.
3. Partner with Durham Housing Authority to ensure that public housing is a safe haven for residents.
4. Increase accessibility to resources for tenants who are prepared to migrate from Section 8 or Public Housing to independent ownership or self-sustained rental properties.

Durham has the resources — from non-profits to committees to funding — to counter our crime, empower our small businesses, and provide a roof over every resident's head. We must establish robust coordination of those resources. We as a local government partnered with local residents most impacted have to be the focal point for that coordination.

So now we're in a pivotal position to build a new Durham together — one that is more accessible, equitable, inclusive, engaging, and practical. We have the talent and solutions already. It's up to all of us to determine how and when we meet that goal.

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?

“In Durham, the median household income is \$65,317, and the average monthly rental price is \$1,287... during the first six months of the pandemic, Durham saw the highest percentage increase, of 34 percent. In other words, the average renter making the median household income in Durham County would spend nearly 24 percent of their gross income on housing, before income taxes or any other payroll deductions are taken out of their paycheck.” -WRAL Techwire

It has become blatantly obvious (to most of us) that we had deep disparities before the pandemic which were exacerbated in the last two years. While the poorest of Durham struggle to make ends meet, the appeal of big tech companies in RTP are drawing wealthier residents to our city. We are seeing how that is playing out in our housing market. We need to support our renters and keep them housed now and sustain this work well after the pandemic.

Many renters do not know their rights or they face confusion in a system that was not meant to help them. Durham should continue to invest in a robust Evictions Diversion Program to establish a universal right to counsel for those who are facing evictions. Many of the evictions faced in Durham are from public housing; we need to collaborate with the Durham Housing Authority to reform their eviction filings. There are also a number of resources and organizations that can support residents with rental assistance like the HOPE program; we need to advocate for these programs. We also need to support grassroots coalitions to focus on intersecting issues that include housing but can address other issues like food insecurity, healthcare, and legal aid. As we know, these issues are all connected. However, we know that organizations cannot keep up with the housing demand and lack of affordability. We need to get people access to economic support from a public-private fund to not only survive this hard time, but also be able to stand on their own two feet and be well prepared for any hard times in the future.

We need to reduce the disparities that our communities are facing by investing in racial equity. We know that evictions in Durham have affected mostly Black and Latinx communities, but we do not have the desegregated data. This is common across the country that we do not track race and gender of evictions, but we should. With this kind of information, we can better inform our policies and prevent further discrimination in the housing space.

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?

Adequate housing is a fundamental human right. All people deserve the right to homes that are safe, secure, and free from environmental hazards. Every resident regardless of their socioeconomic standing deserves access to quality and sufficient housing. They should have the support to work toward ownership within the city they live (a case for reparations). It is imperative that we work collectively to ensure that renters have access to quality housing that does not impose a severe financial burden.

We have to increase our affordable housing inventory. In order to do so, we have to build sensibly and intentionally. I propose that we identify and rezone underutilized property across the city to zone into design districts. We can build neighborhoods on those properties and inject housing inventory at the AMI level. Design districts are ideal for affordable housing here in Durham. They would not require parking minimums and can be zoned for open spaces, parks, trails, and other arts and cultural amenities. These spaces allow for more mixed-use, mixed-income properties.

Through the expansion of opportunities for home ownership, our city will be best positioned to combat the forces of gentrification. This is also a method in which we can leverage transient populations as they are affiliated with better paying, more permanent jobs. I believe Durham now has an opportunity to continue the diversification of its housing model to incorporate additional multi-use properties not only as a means to attract more tenants but to increase our housing inventory. We can also leverage the value of public housing by designing them to actually serve our communities and better utilize the properties while simultaneously improving the quality of living conditions for Durham's public housing residents. This strategy would increase accessibility to resources for tenants who are prepared to migrate from Section 8 or Public Housing to independent ownership or self-sustained rental properties.

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*)

Zoning and development policies can limit displacement in our communities and neighborhoods, especially historically Black communities. This is unfortunately not a new story for us as a city, but we have seen the positive impacts of organizing and partnerships from Crest Street to Walltown.

In their letter to the Durham City Council, the Walltown Community Association lays out a redevelopment plan that is open and accessible and the "property must create connection to the community." They outlined affordable housing, affordable retail, accessible

community-centered design, and environmental sustainability -- these are also the priorities for the design districts that I am proposing. I also believe that historically Black neighborhoods should be eligible for the Longtime Homeowner Grant Program as we are seeing increases in property taxes in areas being redeveloped. It is important to consider that around 20% of Durham's population is 65 and over; many of them have been lifelong residents of this city. We must provide protections for the elderly in these neighborhoods to ensure they are also able to stay in their homes.

Durham residents can and should have a voice in the development of their neighborhoods. We honestly need to democratize the development process as we have with participatory budgeting and other city initiatives. Developments should be accountable to the residents of Durham.

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

Durham is at a pivotal point. We are positioned to grow significantly within the next two decades. Our response at this moment is vital for Durham's BIPOC (Black & Indigenous People of Color) communities, small businesses, and overall quality of life. It is clear the more developed areas of Durham have a few basic assets that beautify them, enhancing the quality of living through safer, more accessible, and practical land use. Durham should address future development in its Comprehensive Plan through a lens of equity, ensuring that community voices have a place in all parts of the design and development process. The more communities we have with sidewalks, access to public transit with bus stops (that are illuminated with seating), and more trees planted in communities of color, the higher the value of our land is. As we consider the density of our downtown region, we can offer the opportunity for the business community to have more options to reinvest in Durham beyond the mandatory sales tax. As Durham becomes more attractive to companies small and large, I believe there's leverage in providing space for use through zoning policy. This is where requesting the use of sustainable buildings that are environmentally friendly and sponsorship of public parks and greenways can be imperative.

Durham has done a stellar job in the revitalization and restoration of structures from our past, though not without flaws. We can now expand that concept via land in the outer downtown corridors. There are some communities in dire need of development. We can coincide the reconstruction model of public housing with multi-use properties. This is one method in which I believe we can make Durham more practical for all, accessible for our most vulnerable residents, all while enhancing the quality of life throughout the entire city.

We can also diversify housing to increase density in our urban tier. We can rezone our neighborhoods to include the "missing middle" such as accessory dwelling units, triplexes, fourplexes, six plexes with affordable housing requirements, and cottage clusters.

We can also be the first city council in Durham to create a design standards guide. This will require new structures to match the facades of our more beautiful older buildings so that we can have new construction with the same character of our historic buildings.

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've attended and reviewed these demands, and I appreciate the insight and research that Durham Beyond Policing and Durham for All presented during these information sessions and town halls. I will commit to working together with Durham Beyond Policing and Durham for All to vote for what is best for our community at that time. It is possible that with the next city council, we can do more. I believe this compromise is the bare minimum of what our city should and can do. We need to have an entire emergency response corps that exists as its own department, separate from the police department. I am hopeful that the strides we have made in the community through the Community Safety and Wellness Taskforce as well as the Community Safety department will support the long-awaited and necessary calls for support in Durham.

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?

We as a community are now tasked with holistically redefining what policing looks like for our city. As a former Durham Public Schools educator, I was often praised by my colleagues and peers for being attentive, proactive, and nurturing when it came to serving our students. About nine months ago, after seeing a young Black man on the news for committing murder, I realized that I had reached my capacity for violent crimes perpetrated by young Black men.

I began to document and aggregate news stories of all the young Black men who were committing serious crimes. The offenses ranged from battery and assault to homicide. Throughout the course of documenting news stories, I identified nine former students whom I personally taught. It was heartbreaking. This became the number one issue in Durham for me. I

understood this to be an issue largely caused by a lack of community engagement and an eroding social safety net.

However, it is critical that we ensure that our city has the necessary resources to transition from reactive management of criminal infractions to proactive prevention. For example, establishing emergency response teams within public service agencies provides a baseline support infrastructure. This is how we can transition from over-policing in neighborhoods of color to building authentic community relationships and specialized responses. I believe that this approach will proactively curb infractions while actually serving and protecting our neglected residents.

I believe the key to public safety is strategic and authentic public engagement. We need to expand our social safety nets in Durham. This can be achieved by increasing the availability of the activities being offered across our city such as community training centers, more after school programs or extended learning time, mentorship programs, and apprenticeship programs.

I propose we fund organizations who are currently performing direct engagement to curb crime at a rate that truly reflects the need. The current annual cost to incarcerate a person in NC is at \$30K. The annual cost of education at Durham Tech is just under \$2K. Trade jobs earned at a community college are now paying well over six figures. At an equal rate, for every 10 people we incarcerate, Durham could actually invest in a new startup that could produce millions of dollars back into the economy here locally.

I propose we establish a city-wide apprenticeship program for high school juniors and seniors with startups and local businesses throughout Durham. In addition, it would be beneficial for our young people to expand "Extended School Day" services sponsored by the City of Durham. It is also imperative that we update public infrastructure to increase access to greenways, playgrounds, public parks, and other activities that young people can be involved in.

I propose we establish a legitimate emergency response corps (in addition and collaboration to the Community Safety department) for nonviolent offenses and seek community and data-driven decisions on the allocation of resources and funding for mental health and public safety.

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?

We need to address environmental concerns while providing equitable and affordable transit. The 20th century was built around the idea that the more roads we build, the better. This has led to unprecedented traffic. Additionally, the space required to park vehicles is substantial, especially given the lack of availability of affordable housing in the city. Every two parking spaces requires the same square footage as a 600 sqft apartment. And the climate impacts are

tremendous with transportation accounting for the single largest source of greenhouse gas emissions in the country. It is time to look at a 21st century way of moving that prioritizes people. We need better pedestrian infrastructure, including sidewalks, greenways, and safe crossing points. The Durham transportation department has over a year long backlog of intersections that require traffic calming measures because of their risk to pedestrians.

Durham has small, dispersed greenway systems. While the American Tobacco Trail is utilized by all demographics, it does not connect into other transportation options with enough frequency to make it a viable option for daily commuting.

Mass transit must be a part of the equation and an area where Durham has tremendous opportunity. Many community members who rely on our bus system struggle to maintain jobs because of the inefficiency in our current routes. Fast, frequent and free buses across the city would reduce the racial inequities we see in access to transportation. Funding through property taxes or bond measures could achieve our needs for free bus fare. There is currently a transportation bond under discussion that could be placed on the ballot as early as 2022. We can also utilize the funds from the American Rescue Plan.

Trains are also an important piece of the transit puzzle. While the proposed light rail line connecting Durham and Chapel Hill fell through, Charlotte has proven that light rail is effective for North Carolina cities. With an average daily ridership of 27,700 people, the Lynx Blue Line is a great example of how light rail can reduce Vehicle Miles Traveled, reduce traffic congestion and increase equitable access across the city.

The current infrastructure bill in the Senate will dedicate 66 billion dollars to Amtrak and Amtrak intends to increase service between Raleigh and Charlotte with commuter options between Durham, Cary, and Raleigh. However, it will take several years before Durham benefits from these changes.

By integrating trains, buses and greenways we can create a transportation network that is fast, effective and cheaper than our current single occupancy vehicle model.

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?

As a small business owner, I almost lost my business three times during the pandemic. The pandemic exposed severe vulnerabilities for an entire sector of our economy, which happens to be Durham's largest employer: our small businesses. We faced one of the most difficult challenges of our lives. We were forced to close our shops. Once that happened, major box stores and national/international corporations like Amazon raked up the market share while small business owners, mostly women and BIPOC, were left to fend for themselves. Durham's

mom and pop shops had no choice but to wait it out. We sought support from our local government. That is when I realized, of all of these years, we were hollow at our core for small business support infrastructure.

I adamantly believe that Durham is uniquely positioned to create her own supply chain of progressive businesses and a supportive culture of homegrown talent. Funds which I have facilitated in the last year like the Small Business Support Group will serve as an immediate and long-term response to COVID-19, and it can support long-term concepts like equitable local ecosystems. This has the potential to have a massive impact on our local economy. However, from a long-term perspective, this is just one example of how public-private partnerships are key to the sustainability of economic development.

Here's my commitment to Durham's small businesses and workers, especially suffering from this pandemic. I propose to establish a robust Small Business Sustainability and Success Program. I would expand, evolve, and innovate the work of the Office of Economic & Workforce Development to be reflective of its small business community. I would advocate for a post-COVID feasibility study on the state of Durham's small businesses and workers, and I would re-establish pandemic roundtables and task forces.

I would also like to highlight the powerful work that our community did over the pandemic to feed Durhamites and provide support to those who most needed it. It is essential that we sustain our neighbors through not only policies and practices but a culture of generosity and service. Grassroots initiatives and mutual aid have been life-sustaining during these pandemics. We as a city should be able to coordinate these efforts more fully so that communities are not left to do this work in silos.

Durham is serious about protecting the health of its residents. The city has been more conservative and cautious than the state, especially recently enacting the indoor mask mandate and the state of emergency. Durham continues to respond to news from public health entities to provide guidance and safety measures as developments of the variants arise. I and many other residents are grateful that we continue to have vaccine clinics and free testing sites across Durham.

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?

Every city councilmember should have an advisory board that's democratically recognized. I know I will. Representatives from Ward 3 will meet with me once a month to debrief me on the issues that are affecting their neighborhoods. That way, I can be better informed on my decision making.

The foundation of community engagement that the participatory budgeting cycle set forth will

be an essential tool for upcoming projects and plans. From compensated community ambassadors, community-designed solutions, and democratic voting on policies, we can employ these strategies to community safety and wellness, youth initiatives, and development. We can also build from these strategies to include more Durham residents while addressing barriers like the pandemic, transportation, broadband access, and childcare.

For instance, familiarity and advocacy with the Unified Development Ordinance in Durham should be commonplace, however, many Durham residents do not understand that these rules for development control much of what we can do in our zoning practices. Though the city holds public review and hearings for ordinances, we can share power by including the public as ambassadors to these amendments. The Walltown community comes to mind. Ideally, they would not have had to write a letter in reaction to the development they were seeing in their community, rather, they should have been ambassadors from the beginning.

Another example of sharing power in our community is through the implementation of the findings and strategies from our most recent task forces like the Youth Initiatives and Racial Equity Task Forces, and eventually the Community Safety and Wellness Taskforce. Durham has funded and supported these task forces in their research, engagement, and reporting, but we need to actually utilize these findings and solutions and implement them in our city. Our county and city task force on Durham's Early Childhood Action Plan is finishing up their plan this year, and they will be in the implementation process shortly after. They have already started their outreach to community members with expertise and lived experience for their steering committee. They are also planning on ways to budget compensation for equitable engagement. These practices are vital in power sharing.

Our local boards and commissions are also an invaluable way that we share power in our communities. We hold 43 active advisory boards and commissions in Durham (county and citywide). We need to uplift the work that they are doing and involve many more voices in these bodies. When we as a city make room for more voices in our democratic process, while ensuring there are accessible ways for them to get there (e.g. childcare, location, times, access to broadband), we make more room for solutions and strengths that our community already holds.

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

I'm pro choice. My wife was kidnapped as a child, and I've heard the horrible and traumatic experiences that happened to her beyond her will. I'll be damned if someone is going to tell my wife what she can and cannot do with her body.

It comes down to basic human decency. Bodily autonomy is a human right that we all should have.

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?

Durham does not need more charter schools. Durham Public Schools does a great job offering some of the most diverse choices of education track learning across the entire state. We don't need charter schools in Durham, but I do understand why people resort to them. Our schools have been historically defunded and our schools are not getting the support that they need. Much of the funding needed for public schools is diverted from charter schools in our area. We are also seeing re-segregation in our schools with the increase of charter schools.

Public schools in DPS need adequate funding and support, though this does not lie in the jurisdiction of city council, we can still advocate and partner with the school board and organizations like the DAE, NCAE, PAAC, we are, and many others to advocate for these issues.

I was a public school teacher and administrator, and my son attends Durham Public Schools. I support our public schools.

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 have an advisory council with local representatives with community expertise. This, of course, is not a proxy for deep and meaningful community engagement, but they will be a direct representation and reflection of not only my ward but the city as a whole.

My guiding lights will always be my wife and my son. They are the driving force for my candidacy in the city council, and they represent two major perspectives in this city: Black women and young Black men. Though I know that not all issues impact them directly, I have confidence that they will enlighten me with their perspectives.