



Questionnaire for Mayor and City Council Candidates 2021

Candidate Name: Marion T. Johnson

Date: August 17, 2021

Position Sought : Durham City Council, Ward 1

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

My vision for Durham is a community that is grounded in equity, shared abundance, and accessibility. That kind of community is only possible if we center the experiences and amplify the voices of the people who are closest to harm. That includes people who are suffering from gentrification, displacement, and homelessness. That includes people who are struggling to make ends meet, especially thanks to this pandemic. That includes people who are living in sidewalk-poor neighborhoods with insufficient public transit access.

My leadership will be based in listening to and amplifying those voices, making sure people feel heard--not just by me, but by the city council as a whole. I want people to feel empowered to speak with us, and to know that we will walk alongside them to help find the answers and support that they need.

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

Durham, like most cities, is facing an economic crisis in the wake of COVID-19. We have weathered an \$8 million loss in revenue since the beginning of the pandemic. We're also in a pre-emption-friendly state that prevents the kind of aggressive tax policy that we really need to counteract the decade-plus of regressive tax policies from the state and federal level. However, Durham still has the potential and ability to make strong progressive budgets that prioritize things like a thriving wage of \$25/hour for municipal employees and contractors; affordable medium-high and high-density housing, as well as rental assistance; free public transit; and prioritizing infrastructure maintenance and repair in low-income neighborhoods. Using federal recovery funds is another tool we have available to us to avoid leaning on regressive budget and tax solutions to fill the hole in our city budget.

COVID-19 also exacerbated Durham's housing crisis. We already had a housing shortage, particularly in affordable housing; and were battling rapid gentrification and displacement, especially of Black families. COVID-19 accelerated the eviction rate, the rate at which people become homeless, and the widening wealth gap between homeowners and renters. The people who are most vulnerable are people who have unstable or unofficial housing agreements, or are renting month-to-month, because they often don't qualify for typical tenant protections. We need to expand legal protections for renters, and require that developers agree to eviction protections for new housing developments. The city-county effort that created the Durham Emergency Rental Assistance Program is a great example of how leadership can leverage multiple levels of support - city, county, and federal - to best serve and protect residents.

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?

During the pandemic, people lost their jobs and homes and are now dealing with massive uncertainty and vulnerability, particularly in communities that are hit the hardest – not only when something goes wrong, but when we're failing to invest in the safety net like we should be. To make matters worse, when people are seeking help, they're often navigating confusing resources and facing barriers. Prioritizing the communities who have been hit hardest is the only way to make sure we have an equitable response to COVID-19. Durham can help communities during this crisis by maintaining and enforcing the eviction ban, as well as providing more funding – not just for housing and rental assistance, but to hire more people who can support residents throughout the application process. An eviction moratorium without a rent moratorium or rental assistance really just kicks the can down the road, telling people “you won't get evicted yet, but it's just a matter of time.”

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?

Gentrification, displacement, and unsustainable over-development have created a housing crisis in Durham, especially for Black communities who have lived here for generations. Gentrification is a policy choice, and we can choose differently by:

- Increasing city funding for affordable housing, especially near key transit corridors

- Expanding current incentives for private property developers to include housing for low-income families in new developments
- Fully funding the Eviction Diversion program
- Expanding legal aid to families facing eviction and homelessness
- Increasing rent support for residents in public housing

But our housing crisis goes hand-in-hand with our economic crisis. While our rent and our housing prices are exploding, our wages are stagnating. According to the National Low Income Housing Coalition's latest report, the housing wage in the Triangle is \$21.81/hour. Advocating for a living wage of \$15/hour isn't sufficient anymore. We need to be advocating for a *thriving* wage of \$25/hour - enough for people to consistently keep their heads above water and not be one missed paycheck away from disaster.

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*)

Walltown and the Northgate Mall development is such a striking example of what happens when developers don't feel accountable to the neighborhoods that they're planning to build in. Private investment and development can't continue to change Durham while not including Durham in its planning.

Durham is the only city our size in North Carolina that doesn't utilize small area plans, and I think this is a big missed opportunity. Small area plans are a great tool for residents to clarify and defend their own priorities, especially when it comes to housing, neighborhood repair and revitalization, and environmental policies. They would empower city council to approve developments that are in line with the community's standards and boundaries, and not leave historically Black neighborhoods in particular vulnerable to developers who see the land as an opportunity for profit, not a community to be respected. But most importantly, they would empower residents to determine what their neighborhoods and communities can look like.

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

I think the priority for zoning in Durham right now is to create as much housing as possible, with a particular focus on affordable housing. That means re-zoning city-owned parcels of land as medium-high and high density residential land, so that we can build housing that can accommodate a range of options - not just studios and one-bedrooms - while not contributing too much to sprawl. We can also use zoning to implement environmental policies, such as requiring new developments to commit to carbon neutrality and green infrastructure, and making land use decisions that protect against the environmental racism that's baked into our city.

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 was proud to sign on to the 10 to Transform campaign, and I commit to fulfilling the 10 to Transform demands. Results from cities that have piloted efforts like the Department of Community Safety and Wellness, including New York City, are extremely encouraging. Dispatching trained and unarmed mental health specialists and paramedics instead of police for certain nonviolent emergency calls has resulted in more people accepting assistance and fewer people sent to the hospital. I believe sending armed police into every situation increases the likelihood of violence, especially against Black people and people with mental health issues, and that violence isn't keeping us safe. I'm committed to reimagining public safety in Durham, and believe that this is a crucial and exciting first step to doing so.

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?

I take gun violence in Durham very seriously. My neighborhood sees a lot of gun violence, and a few years ago a man was shot to death right outside our home. In my conversations with community members and law enforcement officers, I'm more convinced than ever that gun violence and other violent crimes are the ultimate result of numerous systemic failures, and that adding more police does not solve any of those failures. Increasing surveillance with programs like ShotSpotter doesn't do anything to *prevent* gun violence. Alleviating poverty, homelessness, and access to guns does prevent gun violence. We need sustained commitment to economic justice, housing justice, and true community safety--and that commitment will take more than just city council. It must be a county-, state-, and ultimately nation-wide commitment.

It's also important to hold space for different communities' relationships to policing in general. Everyone wants a system that supports, protects, and empowers them. But the current policing system we have doesn't give that to everyone. There are some parts of Durham that feel completely ignored and abandoned by this system. There are others that feel surveilled and criminalized. I'm equally concerned with what we do as a city regarding police as I am with how we do it, making sure that residents feel bought in to and brought along in this process.

Otherwise, they have no reason to believe that this process will serve them the way they need it to.

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'm really committed to making Durham more friendly towards people who aren't driving cars - people who are walking, biking, using wheelchairs, or taking the bus. Making Durham a transit- and pedestrian-friendly city will make us a more accessible city, as well as a more environmentally-conscious one. This can include expanding bike lanes and making them more consistent, implementing dedicated bus lanes on busier thoroughfares, increasing bus routes beyond the city center, co-creating a commuter rail throughout the Triangle, and investing in green transit like GoDurham's two electric buses. I've also been excited to see the success of the Streetery, and am interested in how we could make some downtown streets permanently closed to cars so that we can increase pedestrian traffic and free up some space.

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?

Workers need more support in a shutdown than the city alone can provide. Workers need paid sick leave, a guaranteed income, and the real--not theoretical--option of working from home. To work from home, workers also need consistent broadband and phone access, as well as flexible work schedules to accommodate the fact that they're likely also providing more caregiving to family members during the work day.

Local government's two biggest priorities in a crisis are clarity and responsiveness. One criticism of Durham City Council that I've heard from local bar and restaurant owners is that local government leaders were not responsive to these constituents' needs, questions, or suggestions about how to keep afloat during this public health crisis. That lack of response made it difficult for business owners to prepare or pivot during the shutdown, and left them feeling unsupported. The lack of clarity is largely not our local government leaders' fault, since we had a complete failure of leadership from the federal level that seeped into every level of government's ability to respond and support. But the lack of responsiveness still broke a lot of trust. Communicating clearly and responding quickly is critical to ensuring that constituents trust leadership and trust the process.

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?

First of all, as the current chair of the participatory budgeting steering committee, I am a huge fan. Participatory budgeting is particularly dear to me as someone with a budget and tax policy background—my role at the NC Justice Center was to help community members feel engaged in and empowered by the budgeting process, and to prepare them to speak with their legislators about their own budget priorities.

Another way to further democratize the city government process is through small area plans, which put so much more power in residents' hands to determine what their neighborhoods and communities can look like. I would be excited to champion small area plans in Durham, starting with historically Black neighborhoods that are most vulnerable to displacement.

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 all birthing people's right to choose whether to remain pregnant or not. I strongly believe in reproductive freedom, including abortion rights, TGNC-affirming health care, and comprehensive & sex-positive sex ed. I'm deeply worried about the future of reproductive freedom, in North Carolina and the country in general, since courts are stacked with conservative anti-choice judges. I know city council does not have a lot of power in this arena, but I would absolutely advocate to our state legislature for them to expand reproductive freedoms for all residents.

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 do not believe Durham needs more charter schools. In a best case scenario, charter schools provide families with the option of more individualized and more accommodating school environments. Unfortunately, in North Carolina charter schools have largely been used to divert funding from public schools that need it, effectively stranding low-income, Black, and brown students in under-funded and unsupportive environments. If charter schools weren't reliably re-segregating our school system, I would feel differently about them. As it is, I support more funding for our public schools before increasing the number of charter schools in Durham.

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 I've grown, I've learned to let go of the ideal that so many Black women are held to and hold ourselves to—the superwoman who can do everything on her own. I've really learned to lean on my squad, and to be there when my squad needs to lean on me. In the past several months of this campaign I've particularly been leaning on Black women in my life. I have a phenomenal

network in Durham, including teachers, parents, small business owners, activists, elders, and elected officials. And I will continue to seek the insight and support of people I trust to be honest with me, because even if we disagree on methods, we share the same values.

But at the end of the day, any decision I make has to hold up to my own values, because I'm the one making the decision. I have to feel morally right about my choices and sign my name to them. I have to believe that my choices are furthering equity and sharing power, not reinforcing a harmful status quo.