



## Questionnaire for Mayor Candidates 2023

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Candidate Name: Leonardo "Leo" Williams

Date: 8/2/2023

Position Sought: Durham Mayor

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**Question #1 Why did you decide to run for office? And what do you see as the primary qualities and responsibilities of the Durham mayor?**

I am a bridge builder and a firm believer in consensus building. I understand that effective governance requires collaboration and cooperation, even when differing viewpoints are present. I value diversity of thought and believe that respectful dialogue and open communication are essential in finding common ground and working towards shared goals. I do not need to agree with someone politically to respect them and work with them in a constructive manner. In my role as an elected official, I am committed to ensuring that everyone's voice is heard and considered, regardless of their background or beliefs. As mayor, I am dedicated to representing and advocating for the needs and interests of all constituents, fostering an inclusive and responsive government that serves the entire community.

Our Durham City Council and Mayor play a vital role in shaping the city to be the best place to live on behalf of all our residents. We actively engage with the community to create policies and practices that are informed by the needs and desires of the people. Providing residents with all the necessary resources to live, work, and play in Durham is an important part of what we do.

We have to ensure our city is maintaining essential resources such as clean water, accessible spaces, transportation options, and a clean environment, while also ensuring crisis support for those in need. Acting as liaisons between the government and the people, we are responsible

for translating the desires of residents within the community and representing a positive image of Durham as ambassadors on behalf of its diverse and vibrant population. As mayor, I aim to create a city that truly caters to the well-being and prosperity of everyone.

**Question #2 What do you see as the City Council's top 3 governing priorities over the next 4 years? And what specific policies or initiatives would you work to enact in order to address these priorities?**

I believe our City Council's top 3 governing priorities should be housing, safety, and transit. My vision to address these priorities is (1) diverse housing options that allow for stable, safe, and affordable shelter, (2) robust economic development initiatives, (3) an infrastructure that will support multimodal transit options and expanded connectivity, (4) an environment that is built and sustained by us all, and (5) effective strategies to address public safety and improve the overall quality of life for all residents of Durham.

**Question #3 In 2021 and 2022 North Carolina and the Durham area ranked within the top three in the country for net growth in people moving to the area. What's your plan to address the housing needs of the large influx of people coming to the city while trying to stem the number of long-term residents that are being pushed to the edges of the county or into neighboring counties?**

There are a few considerations to address housing needs that support both the large influx of people and our long-term residents being priced out of the city. Within legal parameters, we can modify codes to cut development costs and ultimately lower the cost of living. By establishing more private-public partnerships in development, we can create additional avenues for the local government to subsidize relative cost housing. We need to differentiate between various types of affordable housing, from workforce housing to public housing, and to have the flexibility to subsidize housing at different levels. This includes a focus on relative cost housing, where the government can adapt and subsidize housing to cater to specific needs. We must recognize that "affordable housing" is a broad term and ensure that our efforts cover not just public housing but also mixed-income options. To maximize impact, we should leverage affordable housing bonds like we did with public housing; this allowed us to work with entities like DHA to diversify housing options and stretch available funds to extend the reach of housing units offered. Affordability is relative, and understanding this concept will be essential in our pursuit to create and sustain an adequate supply of affordable housing in our community.

When elected mayor, I will actively collaborate with various entities to address the affordable housing challenges faced by residents falling between 51-80% of Area Median Income (AMI). One effective approach is through private-public partnerships that cater to residents at every income level. For instance, I have and continue to support initiatives like Housing for New Hope, working to preserve 125 units for affordable housing and providing funding for purchasing the land to create additional units. Workforce development programs such as the Bulls initiative, Jobs+, and the citywide apprenticeship program, which I successfully secured

funding for, will play a crucial role in empowering residents to obtain housing that aligns with their affordability. Additionally, I will explore opportunities to leverage expanded housing choices, utilizing the beneficial policies that can be added, modified, or implemented within our UDO process to build smaller-footprint housing along transit corridors. By doing so, we can reduce the reliance on cars and lower transportation costs (I am currently one of the city's leading representatives on bus rapid transit and intercity networks), allowing residents to allocate those savings toward more affordable housing options. Through strategic collaborations, targeted workforce development, and innovative housing choices, we can work towards alleviating the housing challenges for our community members and ensure a more inclusive and sustainable housing landscape for all.

I am committed to addressing the housing needs of low-income residents by implementing a comprehensive approach that includes wraparound services. Working alongside Commissioner Wendy Jacobs and Councilmember Javiera Cabierro, we have already made strides in this direction by supporting Housing for New Hope's acquisition of Carver Creek. This successful model ensures the preservation of housing as a permanent solution while acquiring surrounding land to provide essential wraparound services for vulnerable populations throughout Durham.

Moving forward, my administration will continue to foster strong partnerships with the Durham Housing Authority, Durham County, and private sector stakeholders to increase the supply of housing options that offer holistic living solutions for low-income residents. By collaborating with these entities, we can pool resources, expertise, and funding to develop and maintain housing projects that not only provide affordable homes but also offer crucial wraparound services to address various needs of the community members. These services may encompass healthcare access, mental health support, job training, educational resources, childcare facilities, and more, depending on the specific requirements of the residents.

**Question #4 Do you support the full expansion of the H.E.A.R.T. program by 2026 to be fully staffed and offer 24/7 services city wide? Why or why not?**

I am committed to the HEART program and its mission to add mental health resources to public safety, and I am an advocate to fully staff the program, offer it citywide, and an expand its hours. I have been a staunch advocate for the pilot of the HEART program and its recent expansion, and I will continue to support its extension citywide and the expansion of its hours. The early success of the program is encouraging, and I believe in its potential to make a positive impact on our community. However, I also recognize the importance of supplementing the program with other human resources available throughout our community. This includes providing comprehensive care for the whole family, from early childhood education to job placement opportunities for adults and youth. By evolving the HEART program to be more proactive than reactive, we can ensure that people can get connected to long-term care and support that addresses their mental health needs holistically, ultimately reducing potential triggers that result in unfortunate outcomes.

**Question #5 Gun violence is high on many voters' minds due to the uptick in mass shooting events and neighborhood shootings, both of their reverberating impacts in our communities, and the lack of will of North Carolina's General Assembly to adequately address the issue. Please state your understanding of the root causes of gun violence in Durham. What steps do you believe Durham City Council could take to help curb gun violence and its impacts?**

As long as fundamental human rights assets like housing, jobs, food security, and education remain inaccessible to certain residents, crime will persist as a symptom of underlying societal issues. We need to focus on comprehensive solutions to crime and gun violence. We as the city government should prioritize addressing the root causes of crime by investing in social programs and initiatives that aim to uplift communities, ensuring equal access to opportunities and resources for all residents.

Recently on city council, I delved into a pressing problem facing our city – the disproportionately high involvement of Black men and boys, aged 12 to 24, in gun violence. As an actionable solution, I successfully secured funding in the budget for a task force dedicated to studying and understanding the root causes of this issue. The goal of this task force was to identify and direct resources effectively, with the ultimate aim of reducing and ultimately putting an end to their engagement in gun violence.

**Question #6 When tensions are high in a group of your colleagues, what are the values and practices that guide your interactions with others who have different ideas and stances than yours?**

I will be committed to fostering a culture of collegiality and respect, even during difficult and contentious discussions surrounding complex policy decisions. My driving force will always be what is best for the community, transcending individual feelings. I always act with a moral and principled mindset which my mother instilled in me, and we as a council must reflect unwavering integrity. Ultimately, my leadership will be results-oriented, emphasizing action and progress to lead the council effectively, supporting the importance of listening attentively to all stakeholders and to each other. Through these efforts, I aim to build stronger relationships and collaborative partnerships that benefit the entire Durham community.

When faced with contradictory views, as a public servant, my decision-making process is guided by a commitment to selflessness and what is best for the overall community. It is crucial to recognize that my personal beliefs and preferences must sometimes take a backseat to the greater good and the well-being of the people I serve.

I carefully weigh the advice from city staff, advisory committees, and residents, recognizing that multiple perspectives are valuable in shaping well-informed decisions. I strive to qualify and quantify these decisions, taking into account all the impacts they may have on the

community. Logic and reason play a significant role in my decision-making process. By analyzing the information presented and evaluating the potential consequences of various choices, I aim to make objective and rational choices that align with the city's long-term interests.

A practical example of this approach is the decision concerning the Heron Rookery. While my personal preference may have been for the city to maintain control over it, I recognized the broader reach and benefits that come with registering the area as a state-sanctioned park. In this instance, I chose to vote against my personal preference to maintain it ourselves, understanding that codifying it through the state would have greater advantages for the community at large.

**Question #7 In the 2023-24 Durham city budget, \$10 million was allocated to revitalizing Hayti. In the past few decades, many revitalization efforts in rapidly growing cities have become the beginnings of gentrification of historically Black and Brown neighborhoods. How would you ensure that this does not happen in Hayti, and that Hayti's working class Black people and long-term residents will benefit from the revitalization efforts?**

The first step is ensuring revitalization means just that, revitalize what's there. When these efforts don't involve the voices of our communities, when we actively work to ignore their wishes and concerns, that's when we see the negative impacts of gentrification and displacement. I am not ignorant of the history of our people, and there is much to learn from how the first "revitalization" efforts in Hayti displaced people and destroyed thriving businesses. Any revitalization project must cautiously be accompanied by supportive and innovative policies that will sustain an infrastructure that not only builds capacity, but protects the character of the existing neighborhood. A great example of this is the MLK neighborhood in Southside Greensboro. With significant engagement of community members, public-private partnerships, and subsidized government support, the neighbors became the makers of their new space. They all benefited from the increased value of their district, they collectively increased sales tax revenue in their area, and this happened without mass displacement. In our most recent budget, I supported the capacity for this policy to soon be implemented in Durham.

**Question #8 Simplifying Codes for More Affordable Development (SCAD) has been a controversial proposed amendment put before City Council this year. There doesn't seem to be disagreement about the need to reform Durham's development codes (zoning, parking, etc.). The main points of contention seem to be how the codes should be amended, what the role and plan for community input is, and who gets to benefit the most from changed codes. The amending of codes will impact Durhamites' lives in significant ways. How will you ensure the amended development codes will guarantee meaningful community input in decisions about developments? What will you do to ensure that amended development codes will reduce the negative environmental impact**

## **of new developments?**

I take every policy with the utmost importance. I do not weigh their importance based on the size of the document or type. That being said, SCAD is a great example of how trust in government has eroded. I am running for mayor to change that. I was elected to do the hard work of making the right decisions for ALL of Durham residents. This particular policy has been obstructed by some members of the community out of concern and some for lack of trust.

I restate my commitment to be selfless in reviewing this policy and voting, just as seriously as I have all other matters that will affect Durham in some form or fashion.

I was the first to offer the idea of breaking this sizable document down into more digestible segments for better understanding within the general community and among myself and my colleagues. That very move allowed us to not have to take an up or down vote on the document at large but to focus on each section to its best version. That is governing. That is being considerate of community fears, humble in understanding, and committed to selflessness.

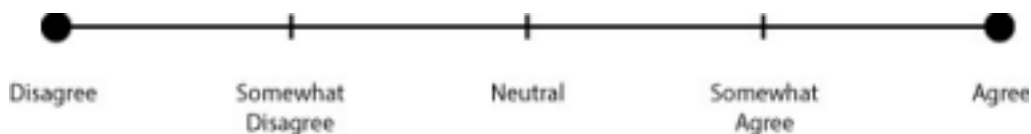
**Question #9 Currently, 30 states and Washington, D.C., have raised their minimum wages above the national floor (\$7.25/hour). Meanwhile, North Carolina workers have been stuck with a wage floor of \$7.25 an hour since 2008 and a \$2.13 tipped hourly wage. As the cost of living continues to rise, these wages are not enough to afford basic necessities. On average in North Carolina, a household of two adults and two children needs to earn a \$33.25 hourly wage to afford the basics—more than four times the current minimum wage. Would you support a resolution stating that the state’s minimum wage should be \$17 an hour and that tipped wages (\$2.13/hour) should be eliminated? Why or why not?**

North Carolina is the number one state in the country in business. Yet, we are last in worker conditions. That is extremely problematic. I celebrate all of our wins, but not without remorse for the missed opportunities. I’m a practicing small business owner and currently, the only member of our Council who pays a payroll every two weeks. I understand the journey we must travel to have a decent quality of life. That’s why I practice what I preach. No team member in my company makes under \$18 per hour. Our servers have tip insurance as well as a base pay; on top of their tips. I believe as a business owner, your team is at their best when they are valued, when their most basic needs are met, and when they have opportunities to grow. This is a lesson that I hope will resonate with our NC General Assembly when I send a very clear resolution that states our values in Durham.

**Question #10 This past year the Council adopted a budget that included funding for a Vision Zero Coordinator and more than \$40 million in projects to make walking and biking safer in Durham. However, there remain extensive gaps in the networks of**

**well-maintained sidewalks, safe street crossings, and protected bike lanes. On the following scale, indicate how much you agree to support annual funding to complete city-wide networks of sidewalks, safe street crossings, and protected bike lanes and to bring sidewalk conditions and accessible curb ramps up to standard. Please explain your response.**

**STRONGLY AGREE**



**Question #11 The Fiscal Year 2023-24 city budget includes funds to keep bus transportation free which benefits many of our working-class residents. What is your plan to continue lessening the transportation cost burdens on working class residents and increasing their access to means of moving around the city in a safe and timely manner?**

As a leader in guiding the city's transportation strategy, I recognize the urgent need to improve mobility within Durham while creating efficient connections to job centers in and beyond Durham. To achieve these goals, I advocate for a shift in transportation priorities, with a strong focus on multimodal options that prioritize urban areas.

My vision for Durham's transportation system is one that offers fast and safe options for residents, reducing the cost of living, minimizing environmental impacts, and eliminating vehicular and bicycle fatalities. One practical approach is converting one-way streets to two-way and narrowing road widths to reduce speeding. For multimodal options, I believe in investing in trails, protected bike lanes, dedicated lanes for rapid bus services, and expanding passenger train services. By creating a comprehensive network of transit choices, we can cater to various commuting preferences and facilitate smooth movement throughout the city and beyond.

Collaboration is crucial in funding transportation improvements. I am currently working with council colleagues to devise an infrastructure bond that will address the much-needed repairs to our streets and sidewalks. This would be a significant step toward improving mobility in Durham, no matter your zipcode. I also play an active role as a leading representative for Durham at the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) level. Through my advocacy, I have contributed to evolving the conversation from commuter rail to Bus Rapid Transit and Passenger Rail. This shift in focus aligns with our vision of enhanced connectivity within and

outside the city.

To address inequities in the Durham Transportation Plan, I am dedicated to ensuring that fixed bus and paratransit services are accessible and responsive to the needs of all residents, especially underserved communities. By conducting equity assessments and actively engaging with impacted communities, we can tailor transportation plans to be inclusive and responsive to their specific requirements.

**Question #12 There are state restrictions placed on the city's ability to raise property taxes on the wealthiest residents in order to increase the city's income. What are ways you'd work with council members to creatively increase the city's income? What would be your top priorities for the money to go towards if the city's income was increased?**

Cities raise money via taxes and spend it. This is how we provide basic necessities and services throughout the city. However, innovation shines brightest in our policy decisions. I plan to request a small business ombudsman to strengthen our small locally-owned businesses as they navigate public resources. The stronger our local economy is, the more sales taxes we can generate. The more sales taxes we generate, the more flexible funds we will have access to. This would allow us to subsidize housing, repair more streets and sidewalks, fund more programming in our neighborhoods, convert underutilized parking lots to parks or open spaces, get us closer to multimodal transportation options, and more. We are restricted in many ways by our state government, but not denied. However, we MUST be able to work together to bring these policies into reality.

**Question #13 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?**

The first step is recognizing that elections are shared powers. However, disengagement after the election dilutes that power. As I have stated to our minority populations who are often disenfranchised, I will say to you and every other individual who is willing to engage to make Durham better; "join me at the policy table." Elected officials can do more than just vote. We can engage in roundtables, think tanks, small group discussions, community forums, etc. to help draft policy, inform the public, and directly impact our city as a whole. I wholeheartedly believe that commissions and boards are filled with residents who care deeply about our issues and concerns and can make a greater impact when their voices are also a part of our decision-making. I have and will continue to build open-door policies around engagement and decision-making for our residents – and certainly not only at times and locations that are convenient for us.

**Question #14 Like any other rapidly-growing city, Durham is facing complex issues with multiple stakeholders and no simple solutions. What is your plan for seeking input from**



**community organizations on these issues and incorporating their constituency's perspectives in the difficult choices that you will have to make as mayor?**

I appreciate that you recognize the complexity of our issues and that there are no simple solutions! Accessibility to the public has been a priority in my engagement by actively listening to and addressing issues affecting our community. I believe listening is key to deep engagement but it is irresponsible to not move forward and create actions. I have made it a point to visit and support small businesses, ensuring their needs are understood and addressed. House visits to residents have allowed me to connect on a personal level and grasp firsthand the challenges they face. When we provide opportunities for engagement that meet the needs of our community, we are better able to serve them. That means that we can't expect people to come to us at every chance.