



Questionnaire for City Council Candidates 2023

Candidate Name: Nate Baker

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Position Sought: Durham City Council – At-Large

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

I was born in Durham, grew up across from Northgate Mall, and attended Durham Public Schools K-12. Growing up in Durham came with both privileges and struggles that have shaped me and provided an unrelenting drive to support and empower the people here, fight exploitation, meaningfully contribute to shaping our future, and help create a more just city. I'm running for City Council because I believe our status quo is not working for working class people and there are issues I want to fight for that can only be accomplished from within local government.

Durham's City Council simultaneously has less and more power than many residents appreciate. Its power is limited by the division of responsibilities between the County Commissioners and Council as state and federal powers, and by the city manager's strong powers under our system.

City Council's role can best be described under three main categories:

1. Bully pulpit
2. Power of the purse
3. Planning and zoning

Bully pulpit

City Council holds a megaphone and microphone to speak out on important issues and create a platform to empower and lift up the voices of Durham residents. City Council sets the tone, influences the public square, and shapes the communitywide conversations. They decide who to hear from at meetings and for how long, and additionally how to use (or not use) the city's vast community engagement infrastructure. Should our community conversations be oriented around community vision and needs, or should it revolve around the wants of real estate investors and other capitalists, and long-privileged groups? That is a question determined by City Council. Council also gets to speak out on issues over which it may not have power, for example using its voice to discuss the importance of rent stabilization laws, even though such laws are currently prohibited in the State of North Carolina, prohibitions which could one day be overturned if we work diligently over time to shift the Overton window.

City Council has a powerful platform to lead our residents by articulating a strong, compelling vision for our future, and each resident's place in that future, and can push us all to be better and do more for this city we love.

Power of the purse

When we think of City Council's role, we most often think of the power of the purse. How does Council raise money and spend it? We've all heard the phrase, "a budget is a moral document" and as dollars are spent it is also wise to consider how we as a community define and measure success through achieving goals set out by the community. So, our allocation of limited dollars measures our *morals* and the way we define how well those dollars are being used can be thought of as a measure of our *values*. While we have limitations placed on us by the state, City Council can use a bottom-up lens to our revenue-raising abilities and spending priorities creatively to better ensure those with ample wealth are providing their fair share to the public good while the burden is lifted from those with less wealth.

Planning and zoning

One of the most profound and underutilized powers of Council is the power to control land use decisions for every parcel in the city, which adds up to over \$50 billion worth of real estate. Those decisions shape every aspect of our city: who can and can't afford to live here; what types of business will thrive; what happens to existing neighborhoods; how integrated and equitable (or not) many of our schools will be; whether and how long the elderly will be able to live here independently; whether we suffer from heat islands and food deserts; how we are able to move around the city, whether it be on foot, on a bus, or in a car. The importance of land use powers cannot be overstated.

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?

-End unsustainable, corporate-driven, car-centric sprawl and replace that model with a transit oriented model of development that extracts public space, walkable urban design, green building, social housing, and social inclusion from capital. I will also seek to guarantee that every home built in new large-scale developments in Durham be within a quarter mile of a public/civic space, including greenways, and use zoning to require a mix of uses. This should become a core part of the spearheading of a Triangle-wide climate action plan that sets the region on a course to carbon-neutrality and climate resilience, holding a high profile, bi-annual climate summit.

-Empower communities from the bottom up and fight against gentrification/economic displacement by establishing a small area planning division within the city administration that conducts robust engagement processes and ties the community vision to concrete objectives and tools within the policy toolbox of local government. One urgent action is to take municipal ownership of the process to equitably redevelop Northgate Mall out of the hands of Northwood Raven.

- I want to see Durham invest heavily in the best out-of-school youth programming in the country, with great summer, weekend, and after-school opportunities. No young person in our city should ever lack safe, fun, stimulating, exciting, and educational things to do.

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?

Housing is a critical policy area because it represents the single greatest proportional household expenditure, followed by growing transportation, health care, and childcare costs. More than any other commodity, housing structures the way individuals interact with others, including their own communities. There is tension between housing as a lived, social space, and housing as real estate.

Solving our housing problems and achieving a just housing system will require the power and purse of the federal government; however, Durham has a variety of unique tools and levers to address housing at the local level. Because most housing is built by private for-profit entities, local housing policy is inextricably linked to neighborhoods, and the land use policies and development procedures and standards that guide and govern their construction. For the past several years, the Durham City Council has approved thousands of acres of corporate-driven rezonings. This policy has permanently locked in place low density, car-centric, single-family sprawl zoning regulations, without requiring the largest corporate homebuilders in the country (like PulteGroup, Lennar Homes, Mungo Homes, and others) to even build and dedicate public parks and greenways, provide walkable

urban design, provide a mix of uses, or even meet our infrastructure and service needs, despite clear state enabling legislation that allows local governments to address those issues (Chapter 160D of the state statutes). The City Council's current policy continues to be to not only encourage, but to require exclusionary HOAs in all new developments. With so many people moving to Durham looking for livable, walkable neighborhoods with a variety of housing types, we are underproviding those kinds of neighborhoods. We have missed enormous opportunities these past few years, but we can still achieve a better future. We can reverse this trend for future development.

If elected, my housing priorities would include:

- Focus limited financial resources on the most vulnerable: people without housing, families with children, older persons on fixed incomes, and those within the lowest 30% area median income
- Advocate for permanent social housing; maintain existing stock, hold onto publicly owned property, and build affordable units around transit
- Work collaboratively with neighborhoods to find win-win solutions for infill housing in targeted places, such as better design standards, affordable housing, and public goods in exchange for higher density, streamlined procedures, and prototypes
- Enact measures that protect naturally occurring affordable housing (NOAH), particularly in neighborhoods undergoing or at-risk for gentrification
- Provide city financial assistance in exchange for long-term affordability guarantees
- Develop a supportive nexus study and carefully craft regulations and practices that provide affordable housing units in market rate developments
- Ensure new housing is part of inclusive neighborhoods, with necessities like childcare, food sources, jobs, services, and transit
- Take advantage of regional solutions and planning opportunities across jurisdictions

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?

Yes. I support it because it has proven to be an effective evidence-based program and a good use of local resources.

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?

Last year, there was a decrease in overall crime in Durham, significantly down from 1990s levels, but with a 35 percent increase in homicides, consistent with trends in the U.S. and other

countries. That increase tracks with nationwide and even worldwide trends; U.S. homicides increased by nearly 5,000, the single largest surge in our country's history. The perception of overall increased crime among Americans has also risen. Polls suggest that policing requires changes, and that police violence is a problem.

Underlying our violent crime problems are federal and state governments choosing not to invest in housing, education, and fundamental social needs; a powerful gun lobby that sinks meaningful gun control legislation; and a staggeringly unjust criminal justice system. Half of the world's prisoners are in the U.S., an astonishing reality. The justice system overwhelmingly punishes people of color and the poor and tears apart neighborhoods. While the white incarceration rate in the U.S. is 600 per 100,000, one of the highest in the world, the rate of incarceration for Black people is five times higher.

Here in Durham, I support evidence-based methods to make communities safer, including implementation of alternative public safety approaches. I support the creation and growth of the community safety department, and their work analyzing jail conditions and re-entry processes, conducting roundtables on key topics like School Resource Officers and violence interruption, and diversion of people suffering from mental illness out of the criminal justice system. I also support comprehensive long-term approaches to crime reduction, like deep investments in parks and recreation, youth programs and internships, affordable housing, jobs, gang intervention, and progressive criminal justice reforms. As the police department is a significant proportion of the city budget, maintaining dialogue and ensuring accountability with the police department and community members is a core part of City Council's job.

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 stay focused on the issues. We should always ask: *How can we best accomplish progressive policy and change?* The answer may vary depending upon the situation. I have long worked with diverse groups of people with a variety of opinions and have been able to get things done.

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?

Durham's Southside presents a classic case of state-sponsored gentrification. The City spent \$48 million dollars to redevelop the neighborhood, including 48 single family homes in phase 3. Only 13% of black applicants were pre-approved for homeownership compared with 60% of white applicants.

We must carefully plan before we spend. Durham is the largest city in North Carolina that does not conduct small area planning. I believe we need to conduct a small area plan, engage with the community, set out a vision, goals, policies, strategies, metrics, and actions. We need to govern carefully, and use a bottom-up approach that prioritizes the most vulnerable community members.

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?

My day job involves guiding cities across the U.S. with rewriting their development regulations. I have conducted code diagnoses and comprehensively rewritten the codes for Kannapolis, NC ([see a brief write-up of that process here](#)), State College, Pennsylvania, and Tuscaloosa, Alabama and worked on many more code projects around North Carolina and the South. Development codes – and who owns the process of their creation – are critical because they represent the DNA that shapes our built environments.

Our current UDO is indefensible. It perpetuates car-centric sprawl, segregation, economic displacement, and bad urban design. Yet, SCAD is poor policymaking and the worst way of proceeding with code amendments, and includes countless poison pills that would be detrimental to low wealth residents and the goal of building a dense, walkable, mixed use, and equitable city.

Durham does not currently use conditional zoning. I support conditional zoning in strategic locations, particularly areas where we conduct robust community engagement. [Here is an example of what that looks like.](#) This provides both ample flexibility and clear guidance, while setting clear community-based expectations.

I will ensure the rewritten UDO includes green building standards and incentives in all new developments, requires publicly-dedicated parks and green spaces, and finally puts in place the standards that start to make Durham a more transit-oriented, polycentric city.

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.

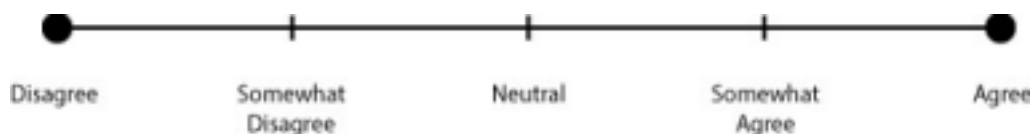
As the cost of living continues to rise, these wages are not enough to afford basic necessities.

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?

I would. I completely understand frustrations we often hear about passing resolutions because they seem purely aesthetic – but I believe on key issues like this, rent control, and other issues, cities across the state should coordinate to pass resolutions and lift these conversations into the public spotlight and bring them back into the public discourse.

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.



Agree. We need to cover our bread-and-butter city functions and building and maintaining our transportation infrastructure needs to be a priority. We also need to hit the delete button on our street cross-sections and design standards because they continue to prioritize vehicle speed over transit, bikes, and pedestrians. We need to ensure 50% of the public right of way width is dedicated to non-vehicular traffic on new streets and street redevelopment projects. I will champion this issue on Council.

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?

I support fare-free buses and will do everything in my power to keep them free. Our built

environment, and the rules and city's practices that shape it, continues to build and rebuild an urban spatial structure designed to require expensive and dangerous private vehicles. We must address land use to bring people's daily needs and activities closer to them. We need to be aggressive in changing our street design standards to prioritize transportation choices.

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?

The city has added 10% of its land area in just the last five years but has done so without requiring many things we should have from corporate developers – this practice puts us into a deep and costly hole. So, exactions will be a key revenue source that come directly from capitalists.

I support using tax increment financing but doing so carefully and effectively.

It is also time to apply pressure for payment-in-lieu of taxes for our City's largest private landowner: Duke University and Duke Health System. We need to follow the lead of New Haven on this issue. There is a lot we could do with an extra \$10 million dollars per year from Duke.

Affordable housing and youth recreation are high budget priorities, but I have many other issues I care deeply about funding.

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?

My guiding philosophy is that everyone in Durham should have a "right to the city," which is a concept that has been written about extensively by David Harvey and incorporated into the constitutions of Brazil and Mexico. In practice in Durham, I will seek to establish a robust system of small area planning. Neighborhoods would build collective visions and work at the fine-grain level to implement appropriate zoning, capital investments, and services. This is a major undertaking but a way of empowering residents and better connecting residents to government levers through collective and balanced efforts. This type of engagement discourages, rather than encourages, NIMBYism which we suffer from now due to lack of trust and engagement around development. There are many ways of implementing this, and we could even loop the participatory budgeting process into the small area planning implementation, as Greensboro, NC has. As an example, here is one of my favorite small area plans that I've had the opportunity to work on: The Arlandria-Chirilagua Small Area Plan. [English version](#). [Spanish version](#).

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 a council member?

Decision-making requires accessing information from a diversity of sources. For me, there is no more important source than stakeholders who are potentially most impacted by decisions. Ideally, the most impactful decisions will be made over time, and communities not only have a chance to weigh in early, but are actively part of the vision and decision-making process wherever possible.

I am currently in the process of identifying a diverse array of community members (including people who disagree with one another) who would serve on a cabinet that I would meet with regularly, ideally quarterly and as needed. I would love to include someone from Durham For All. We have some unnecessary political divisions in Durham, and I will seek to work across those divisions.

Durham also has many active boards and commissions, made up of residents with interest and expertise in specific topic areas. I think it is important to ensure those boards are representative of Durham's diverse population and that boards recognize the value they bring to the community.

City and County staff are very important sources of information and analysis, and the staff reports and recommendations they provide are always valuable in the decision-making process. One very important ingredient to a healthy democracy is a thriving independent press. Local news also provides an information source that I would seek out in the decision-making process. Local journalism is key to holding leaders accountable and making informed decisions. The decline of local journalism is a problem and I think it is worth analyzing and considering innovative ways of providing support.

Finally, I would seek out information the way that I do in my day job, where I look to universities and professional organizations and their journals and magazines. I often read articles in Governing Magazine, American Planning Association magazine, the Institute for Local Self Reliance, National Association of City and Transportation Officials, the UNC School of Government blog, and others. I am also frequently on the phone with other local governments directly to learn about and understand their experiences.