

People's Alliance PAC 2008 Questionnaire for Durham Board of County Commissioners Candidates

Candidate's Name Josh Parker

1. *Do you think that the County Government has exhibited an adequate response to the drought and water crisis? If not, what else could be done and how would it be paid for?*

While County Government is not directly responsible for responding to a crisis in water management I believe that County Government does have a role to play in planning to avoid water crisis in the time of drought and on that front their preparation has not been adequate. The City of Durham manages water supply and are therefore responsible for responding to water management crisis. The County has taken a pro-active role in lobbying for changes in state rules about using gray water and recycling the treated affluent back in to RTP from the County's water treatment plant. But the County needs to take several additional steps to help prevent a water crisis during the next drought:

- The County should work with the city to better plan growth using water demand and supply analysis so that we are guiding land development along with the development of water resources. The county should also work with the city to provide rebates for retrofitting homes and businesses with low flow water devices.
- The County should look at development plans for the county and determine if policies can be put in place to encourage LEED certified buildings, efficient water use in new buildings and retro fitting existing facilities to use less water.
- The County should work with other counties in the region to identify new water sources and opportunities to expand existing water sources so that the region is coordinated in its use of overlapping watersheds.

The cost to the county in implanting these policies should be negligible. The county should not take on the city's role in water, but should assist and coordinate a regional solution.

2. *Are you aware that the Department of Homeland Security has chosen Durham/Granville counties as one of five possible sites for a facility to study dangerous and poorly known viruses and diseases? Do you support the location of this facility in our community? When economic development and public health and well-being are in a potential conflict, where does the burden of proof lie?*

Yes, I am aware that northern Durham County is involved in a potential site for this facility. I do not want to see this type of facility being developed in Durham County. This site is dangerously close to our watershed and poses a significant health risk if something went wrong. County officials should lobby the government to build this facility elsewhere. I would advocate that the facility be located elsewhere. When economic development poses a risk to public health, public health should be the primary concern in making a decision.

3. *The Durham City and County governments' Measuring our Progress report of 2005 focused on 8 measurements. For each, please state Durham County's biggest current challenge—and the single first thing you would try to do as a Commissioner to solve that challenge. One short sentence for each challenge, please! This is an overview question. State the challenge briefly, and briefly state your first method of approaching that challenge.*

- *Children are ready for and succeeding in school*

Early Childhood Education is critical to the long term success of a child. Currently we are not serving the widest group of children because we are not drawing our full allocation of SmartStart

funding from the state. The un-drawn funds (roughly \$2 MM) result from lack of adequate space to house the program (Creekside was built with appropriate classrooms, but overcrowding has repurposed those classrooms for regular school use). The County needs to move quickly in unison with the School System to re-purpose existing county facilities or build new facilities so that we do not lose these much needed dollars.

- *Durham citizens enjoy a healthy environment*

Air quality continues to be an issue plaguing the triangle. Greenhouse gases are a major factor in poor air quality. The County and city have developed a local action plan to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The County must take the lead in advocating expansion of public transit including rail to reduce the number of cars on the road. The county should also encourage other non-car methods of transportation, i.e. biking, walking, etc. The County should work to convert its fleet of vehicles including sheriff patrol cars to electric/hybrid and/or bio-diesel vehicles.

- *Durham's citizens enjoy a community that is vibrant, rich in aesthetic beauty and embraces and promotes its cultural heritage*

The County has not made a long term commitment to the Durham Cultural Master Plan. This plan was developed with the support of a wide cross-section of community residents. One of the most important parts of this plan was the development of a Durham History Museum. I have strongly advocated it and have chaired two committees to work on its formation. The Board of Commissioners must buy in to the plan and fund its implementation including the museum with a dedicated revenue source. This may include a special use tax advocated at the legislature.

- *Every citizen in Durham has access to adequate, safe and affordable housing*

Current tax values threaten to exclude new homeowners. As values and property taxes continue to rise, access to safe and affordable housing will become less accessible to hard working lower income residents. Additionally the county does not have a minimum housing code. The legislature is currently considering a statewide minimum housing code (SB1507) that Durham County should support. If it does not pass in the short session, Durham should adopt its own code. The County should explore property tax rebates for low income homeowners and must explore other funding streams to take pressure off of the property tax.

- *Durham enjoys a prosperous economy*

Durham does not have a coherent economic development plan. The County's current business incentive policy is inadequate. The County should work on establishing a joint city-county economic development office to develop strong policies that encourage the type of economic development that we want in Durham county. The County should lead the development of SWOT analysis with a Porter's Five forces model to develop a strategic plan. We need to maximize existing assets while recruiting new business and work to retain existing companies. None of this can be done effectively without a plan.

- *Durham citizens are healthy*

All Durham citizens need access to recreation and healthy eating options. This is most important to children. School lunch programs are lacking and should be redeveloped at a local level. We should work on developing capacity to grow produce and other items locally, thereby providing higher quality food options and jobs. All Durham citizens need recreation opportunities and the County should work with the city to press for the implementation of the Bicycle and Pedestrian plan.

- *All Durham citizens are safe*

Our courthouse is currently overburdened and can't effectively process the many people who come through. We need to build a new courthouse and continue lobbying for more funding at the state level. I would support continued local funding of the court system until we have a revenue stream at the state level defined. Our judicial system continues to be a revolving door that does not rehabilitate. The county should take a more active role in coordinating county services, the school system and non-profits to deal with this issue. Additionally, we should begin discussions on a merged police and sheriff's department.

- *Durham citizens enjoy sustainable thriving neighborhoods with efficient and well-maintained infrastructure*

Just like Economic Development we do not have a coherent plan to guide land development. There are little protections for established neighborhoods and we do little planning for infrastructure before development is individually considered. Our community needs a plan that connects to our economic development plan that ensure we are appropriately using our natural resources and developing in a way that is sustainable.

4. *Does the above imply that these statements do not apply to residents who are not citizens (i.e. non-citizen immigrants)? What challenges does the County face with regard to these immigrants/residents, and what policies are needed?*

Whether or not someone is a citizen of this country, if they live here, they are part of the Durham community. Our immigrant population is part of what makes Durham unique and we should embrace this multi-culturalism. The quality of life for Durham citizens is affected by all those who live here. If one group is not succeeding, it limits the potential and possibilities of all other groups. Just because someone isn't a citizen doesn't mean we shouldn't want the best for them. Until national immigration policy is set, we should be willing to ensure that everyone who calls Durham home has a good quality of life. Durham has been labeled as a "safe-haven" community. Durham should maintain its current policy and stay away from racial profiling in all of its forms. Durham should also advocate that children of immigrants have full access to our system of education including community college and university. Education is the root of all success and lack of it is the root of failure and we should not deny any child the opportunity to learn.

5. *How do you think that the City and County can work together better? Would you support some form of City - County government consolidation? If not, why not? If so, what are the obstacles to it and how should they be mitigated or overcome?*

I think Durham city and county should merge. However, this is politically sensitive and may not be immediately possible. The major obstacles to merger are political. I would immediately work to consolidate our police and Sherriff's departments because these are the hardest to merge. There are issues around power sharing that will need to be worked out, but if we can deal with this one issue, the other barriers to merger will seem less high. We will also need to deal with issues around elections and representation and tax structure. The current state of our school system shows that merger can work in Durham.

6. *What part can the county play in providing a safety net for the most profoundly mentally ill persons, given the difficulties with state privatization?*

Durham County is one of the few single county LME's in the state. This should provide our citizens the highest quality of service. Unfortunately that is not true. I have researched our mental health system and have spent time with staff at the Durham Center to understand what is working and what is not. I should note that Durham Center is doing a good job of collecting and interpreting data to guide their decisions. The basic problem with Mental Health is that the LME has responsibility, but little control. There are three main funding streams and the LME has only partial control of one. In terms of the County's responsibility for the profoundly mentally ill, our role is well defined. We do not have the local resources to care for these people, but we do have a responsibility for acute care. We must continue identifying and helping people in this group. Even though the system does not currently allow us to adequately follow their treatment when they leave acute care, we must find a way to do so. Otherwise, they will likely return to a situation in which acute care is once again warranted. The County currently is carrying a large fund balance in Mental Health and we should look at the way our dollars go in and the programs to which they are allocated.

7. *In order to raise much-needed revenue for capital needs and operating funds, do you favor enacting a land transfer tax? An increase in the sales tax? Both? Would you support placing these on the ballot for county voters this fall or in 2009?*

I would not take any option off of the table, because our needs outweigh or means. However, I would lean more towards a sales tax change than a land transfer tax. We need to take a regional view of tax policy and overhaul an antiquated system. The state will be changing the tax code in the next several years to keep up with the economy. If we work regionally now, we can build consensus around an equitable tax structure that moves us from an agrarian 19th century model to an updated 21st century model. Our tax system has become regressive, especially in Durham. We have a fixed amount of land and so there is increasing pressure on the tax rate. If you have a fixed amount of base to tax and keep raising the rate, you will prevent low income people from being able to afford taxes when buying a home and will eventually force rents to a level that excludes low income people. The alternative is the inadvertent creation of slums because landlords will pay taxes to keep their land, but not make improvements to their properties. We need to move towards income and consumption taxes so we have resources to provide services locally and means to fund regional priorities. If we make this change regionally we will be better able to fund our growth as a community and can prevent our tax policy from unduly harming low income persons.

8. *Do you support increased mass transit? If so, in what form and how would you propose funding it? If not, why not?*

I support increased mass transit. It is embarrassing that this region can not work together effectively to build a mass transit system. The challenge of my generation will be to better connect people physically, just as we have done to better connect people virtually. Our region needs leadership to make mass transit a priority. Our ability to develop in a way that is smart and sustainable will rely heavily on public transit. Plans in the past have been myopic and have not adequately engaged some primary stakeholders early on. We must continue to build the coalition for mass transit. The STAC report will outline a good strategy that we should work aggressively to support. The sales tax could be a good way to fund this growth, but again we need to take a view of tax policy regionally so that we are equitably funding this regional priority.

9. *The County has provided economic incentives to lure new companies and new jobs to the area. Do you support the current County strategy? Do you have suggestions to enhance this strategy, or would you restrict/reduce it? Do you support the County providing incentives to Greenfire and Scientific Properties for their current proposals? If so, should the County provide similar incentives in the future? Should the County impose certain requirements, e.g., require the creation and maintenance of a certain number of jobs? If so, why, and if not, why not?*

Our current strategy shouldn't be called a strategy. It is not sufficient, nor is it especially good policy. The recent changes to the current policy raised the level of minimum investment a company must make in the community in order to receive incentives. While this may help us to focus on a particular type of company we can recruit it suggests Durham places no value on small business growth and development. Further, there was no analysis of the workforce available or the type of companies we want to attract. And there was no attention to whether or not we could be truly competitive for companies we identify. As an example: a new tire plant could make a significant investment, but are those the jobs we want to add in our economy? Is this the type of company we want to spend resources recruiting? This community needs to undergo an assessment of our fundamental strengths and priorities and determine how we want to develop (geographically, economically, socially, culturally) as a community. With this information we can develop a strategic framework that

will allow us to create a plan for economic development and create policies that will effectively attract and guide the free market. Communities compete with each other for businesses and people, if we are going to be competitive we need to have a plan and work aggressively to implement that plan. The county should stop funding the chamber of commerce to “do” economic development and should instead create work with the city to develop a comprehensive economic development policy. Then the implementation of this economic development policy should be left to organizations like the chamber so they can act as honest broker to negotiate deals with companies using the community’s policy. I have not reviewed the plans from Scientific Properties or Greenfire at a level that allows me to say whether or not they should receive incentives. In principle I am not opposed to them receiving incentives. I would want to make sure their outcomes are consistent with what the community is looking for. We should only provide incentives to development that will grow the community in a way that we have identified as a priority. The bottom line is we need to move away from our “we’ll take anything” reactive policy and move to identifying what we want to be and working to make it happen.

10. What is the primary issue facing Durham County in its land use policies? How would you address this issue?

The primary issue facing Durham County and its land use policies is inadequate planning. Simply having a zoning code and comprehensive plan is not enough. I would apply the framework for how this community wants to grow to policies that would affect land use. I would also more closely align our planning department and our economic development department. Both groups can provide insight to each other. For example, the economic development department might say what land use policies would encourage smart growth while the planning department might point out the areas where we can accommodate development based on our resources and infrastructure. The free market will work, we need to effectively guide it. Right now we are promoting suburban sprawl by making infill development hard to accomplish. We also have a planning review process that is overly intensive and discourages mixed-use and infill development. I would push to develop the framework for how our community wants to grow, overhaul the planning department, and align planning and economic development decisions.