

PA-PAC Questionnaire for Mayor and City Council Candidates - 2015

*When answering this questionnaire, please repeat the questions in your response document with each question numbered and organized as it appears here. Type your responses in **italics**, **bold**, or a different font to distinguish your responses from the questions. Please do not use colors.*

Please return completed form along with your resume describing education, work history, community service, and prior political experience as soon as possible, but by July 30, 2015, at the latest.

You may e-mail your responses to Tom Miller at tom-miller1@nc.rr.com or you may send a printed copy of your responses to Durham PA-PAC c/o Tom Miller 1110 Virginia Avenue, Durham, NC 27705-3262

Please note that following the July 30 deadline, the Durham People's Alliance PAC may publish your responses to this questionnaire and your resume.

Thank you for completing this questionnaire and your willingness to serve the people of Durham.

Candidate's name: **Robert T. Stephens**

Office for which you have filed for election (circle one): **Mayor / At-large City Council**

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Government and the Public Good

1. Of all the issues confronting city government, which single issue is most important to you and why? What would you do about it if elected?

Police accountability is the single issue most important to me. I am a young African-American man, everyone I walk outside of my house there is no guarantee that I will make it back home. That is my reality. If elected, I intend to push for stronger and more responsive leadership at the helm of the police department. Additionally, I will advocate for a residency requirement to be phased in over the course of the next five years.

2. What are the greatest employment needs of Durham's residents? How can city government use its authority and its resources to direct jobs to those who most need them? Be specific.

Economically, we need to ensure that every citizen has a job that pays a livable wage. As Durham prospers, people of color and long term residents need to prosper as well. Durham residents need job training and someone who understands how systemic oppression works. The two systems that deprive our residents of opportunity are the penal system and our schools. We can promote and create more jobs. If we have more jobs than we have workers there is competition for talent which inherently drives up wages.

3. How can the City Council act to lift the wages of the lowest paid workers in Durham and reduce growing income inequality in our community?

I would support or co-sponsor a nonbinding resolution putting the council on record of supporting a livable wage for all residents of Durham, not just city employees and those who contract with it as Resolution 11333 stipulates. Secondly, I would incentivize economic development so that when they develop here in Durham they agree to pay their workers a livable wage. When I say "We Are Durham", I mean we are an inclusive and equitable place to live. If businesses aren't aligned with that vision and belief that we need to provide for all of our citizens, then Durham isn't the community for them.

4. Describe your interest in and commitment to public amenities such as playing fields, open space, and walking and biking trails. Are you willing to raise property taxes to provide for and maintain these amenities?

I am willing to raise property taxes, however, that may not be the first source of revenue we depend on. Further, I am not sure that the money should go to those amenities. Individuals in Durham are lacking basic necessities. Adults do not have the requisite skills to procure good paying jobs. I would advocate for the expansion of our job training programs, prison rehabilitation programs, and funds set aside to promote social entrepreneurs.

Housing, City Planning, and Neighborhoods

5. What does “gentrification” mean to you? Where is it happening? What, if anything, should be done about it?

Gentrification, to me, is the opposite of white flight. You have people with economic resources who purchase land that was once a part of thriving communities and they renovate it, increase the property taxes and force long term residents to move due to lack of resources. The affordability and accessibility of housing has decreased significantly for working class families in Durham which has disproportionately affected POC.

Gentrification is happening throughout downtown Durham and all over this country to be correct. I think we have to come up with innovative solutions to empower communities to fight gentrification such as reducing or freezing property taxes in areas at risk, consider prohibiting large scale luxury development, stabilize existing renters.

6. In 2012, the city completed a project to convert the Ninth Street Compact Neighborhood Tier into a design district. Do you support the planning department's current initiative to create new compact

neighborhood tiers and to convert compact neighborhood tiers into design districts? What is good about the initiative and what is bad about it? What should be done to fix what is bad?

I would need to pour over more data before I come out in support or against the Ninth Street Compact Neighborhood Tier. We do know that more people are living in urban areas than suburban areas and the urban areas become more and more congested people are looking to move from the inner city into areas right outside the city. This creates tension with the people already inhabiting that space. Further, you have to question who will shop at the design district and what are the unintended consequences of creating the district?

7. In 2014, the city council adopted a resolution calling for affordable housing near planned transit stations. Do you support the resolution? Would you change it? Should the city grant developer requests for rezonings near transit areas without commitments for affordable housing? Please explain your answers.

I believe in that measure wholeheartedly. A goal of 15 percent of housing within a half-mile of transit stops being affordable is a step in the right direction. I would push for a greater percentage. I do not support applying for rezoning before commitments. If we do it before commitments are made we give away our leverage.

We have to set the expectation at the beginning that it will be affordable and accessible to all Durham residents. If not, we will not achieve our desired result. Now is our only time to do that. If not, we need to hold out because that is a non-negotiable. The growth and prosperity of Durham has to be accessible to all. If we invest in public transportation it need not have an adverse effect on the living arrangements of our working class citizens.

8. What geographic area(s) in Durham need special attention from city government? In those areas, what are the problems and what action should the city take?

The Eastern portion of Durham and the eastern half of downtown need special attention. Currently, poverty levels are exceptionally high and that damages the ability for the community to thrive. Additionally, homes around North Carolina Central University are surrounded condemned and dilapidated houses which depress housing values, serve as venues for illicit activities. The city should create a free enterprise zone that promotes the development of these areas to developers.

9. Under what circumstances would you vote to downzone a piece of property? By “downzone,” we mean a rezoning action that would reduce the market value of the land being rezoned.

I am willing to consider downzoning on a case by case basis but it needs to be done in a way that doesn't lead to greater gentrification and economic inequality.

City Finances, Capital Improvements, Transportation, and City Services

10. The city manager recently gave city council members a list of potential capital improvement projects to prioritize. Of these, what are your top four priorities for capital expenditures? Is there something

that you would include in your top four that was not on the manager's list? Would you be willing to raise property taxes to accomplish your priority projects?

I would prioritize recreational spaces, sidewalk work, aquatic center, and bridge repairs. I would be willing to raise taxes to accomplish my priority projects after careful consideration of the facts.

11. The city council recently voted to provide \$11.25 million in public financial support to two private development projects in the downtown area. Did the council make the correct decisions in those cases? Are the projects equally deserving? As a council member, what philosophy will guide you in deciding whether to provide public financial support to private development enterprises?

With the information I have at my disposal, I support the decision to provide \$11.25 million in public financial support to the Chesterfield and Durham ID projects in the downtown area. I see the value of bringing 1500 high wage jobs to area, however I am concerned about who will fill those jobs.

Additionally, I am concerned about giving away future tax revenues. We have an obligation to govern responsibly and 70% of future tax revenues is extremely high. I am not sure the Durham ID is as deserving as the Durham ID. Using open space on private property has not proven to be as successful as I would like. I would use the philosophy of the public good. Are my decisions rooted in what's best for Durham, and not just downtown Durham, but all of Durham? How will everyone benefit from these developments? I would ask these questions of myself before I cast a vote.

12. Under what circumstances would you vote to raise bus fares? Is the city's public transportation system being managed effectively? Is it serving the population which needs it the most? Please comment on your philosophy concerning Durham's public transportation system.

I would vote to raise bus fares for a route designed to cater to a special demographic; specifically, wealthier riders who are concerned about reducing their carbon footprint. In terms of managing effectively, there is always room for improvement.

When we think about serving the population which needs it most, I think about low income individuals without transportation. Citizens in certain parts of Durham are getting terminated from their jobs because the bus system is not reliable. We have to do better in that sense. For public transportation to be truly accessible, we need affordable and reliable transportation.

13. The City Council recently voted to approve a "road diet" for Highway 15-501 between University Drive and Chapel Hill Road. Did the council make a wise decision? In general, do you support or oppose reducing vehicular travel lanes to promote traffic-calming, parking, and bicycle and pedestrian travel?

I think the council made the best decision they could with the information at their disposal. Safety is important. As a cyclist myself, I see the need to slow traffic down and create lanes for everyone to share the road. The road diet is a great start, but we need crosswalks, lights, and sidewalks as well. Generally speaking, I support reducing vehicular travel lanes to promote traffic calming. Additionally, the easier we make it to travel by bike or walking the better off our environment is.

14. In general, do you support public funding of city programs and services through property taxes or user fees? Please explain your answer.

I support public funding of city programs and services through property tax. A usage fee means that everyone regardless of their economic background pays the same rate. Those who have economic vitality and wealth should be paying a larger portion. They should be on the hook because they have earned more. The working class mother with 3 children should not have to pay a fee for using a park. The burden/cost of civic programs should be on those with means, not the ones with little to no economic vitality.

Law Enforcement

15. Is there a trust problem between the people of Durham and the police department? Are you satisfied with the department's responses to issues of use of force, racial profiling, searches, and communication with the public?

Yes there is a trust problem between the people of Durham and the police department. Citizens do not trust the police nor do they believe in their ability to effectively police our communities without bias. No I am not satisfied with the department's response to the issues of use of force and racial profiling, searches and communication with the public.

16. Is the Civilian Police Review Board an effective tool for police oversight? If you perceive problems with oversight of the police department, what should be done to correct them?

I do not think the Civilian Police Review Board is an effective tool for police oversight. I believe the CPRB needs sharper teeth. It is imperative that they have the ability to discipline officers.

17. Should the enforcement of laws criminalizing marijuana use be among the police department's lowest priorities?

Yes, the enforcement of laws criminalizing marijuana use should be among the police department's lowest priorities. When we arrest people for marijuana use, they go to jail, have to pay fines and court costs which they might not have and the record hinders them from being productive citizens in the future.

Civil Rights

18. Would you support legislation designed to protect gay, lesbian, and transgender people from discrimination in housing, employment, public accommodation, and access to government benefits and services?

Yes, I would support legislation designed to protect gay, lesbian, and transgender people from discrimination in housing, employment, public accommodation and access to government benefits and services.

Personal and Political

19. Have you ever been convicted of any criminal offence other than a minor traffic offense? Have you ever been charged with a felony (without regard to the disposition of the charge)? If the answer to

either of these questions is yes, please describe the charge or charges, the circumstances, and the outcome.

No.

20. Is there currently a judgment of debt outstanding against you? If so, please explain the circumstances.

No.

21. How are you currently registered to vote? Have you ever changed your registration with regard to party status? If so, when, and why?

I am a registered Democrat. No, I have not changed my registration with regard to party status.

22. For whom did you vote for in the 2008 and 2012 presidential and gubernatorial elections? For whom did you vote in the 2014 U. S. Senate election?

I voted for President Obama in both 2008 and 2012 presidential elections. I voted for Bev Purdue in 2008 and Walter Dalton in 2012. I voted for David Alameel in 2014 Senate race.