

PA-PAC Questionnaire for Mayor and City Council Candidates – 2017

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 try to confine your responses within the word limits set for each question. They should be generous. Do not feel obliged to exhaust the limit for each question.

Please return the completed form along with your resume describing education, work history, community service, and prior political experience as soon as possible, but by July 30, 2017, 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: **Vernetta Alston**

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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? *Please limit your answer to 300 words.*

All issues affecting our community relate to our struggle to reconcile institutionalized racism, class, and gender-based systems with our shared and indistinguishable humanity.

An issue that is of great concern to me is the distorted concept of safety - rooted in fear, racism, and violence - that continues to prevail in Durham. Law enforcement practices suffer from this distortion; resulting in disproportionate stops, arrests and searches of people of color, unjustified use of force, disrespectful treatment of LGBTQ folks, targeting of our immigrant communities, and collateral

consequences that dehumanize many people. This misguided concept of safety has far-reaching implications, but for policing specifically, the city must commit to protecting everyone and investing in the things that actually promote safety, like adequate health care, food, and housing.

If elected, I want to be instrumental in reshaping Durham's approach to safety and making this city a safe community for everyone. First, we must encourage those in city government, law enforcement, and other positions of influence to examine why people of color, the poor, and other marginalized communities continue to be targeted. I want to hold Chief Davis and the Police Department accountable to their efforts to address disproportionate treatment of people of color, specifically, the department's discretionary power to stop and arrest people, their recent order to stop conducting traffic checkpoints, which is a misleading promise since the City will continue to participate in multi-jurisdictional and community-initiated checkpoints, and methods of recourse for police misconduct. I want help eliminate the targeted attacks on our immigrant populations, specifically local cooperation with federal deportation proceedings. I want to push for more transparency with use of force and police discipline beyond the mere use of body cameras, which are being used to document everyday activity without adequate transparency measures for residents. I also want the city to invest in restorative justice, support for those who have had contact with law enforcement, and divest law enforcement from addressing needs that can be served by community members.

2. What can the city do to lift the wages of the lowest paid workers in Durham and reduce growing income inequality in our community? Where in our community do you see opportunities for city government to address the racial wealth gap? *Please limit your answer to 400 words.*

The City's effort to boost the minimum wage of full-time employees to \$13.36 this year and \$15 in future years was certainly a step in the right direction. We must extend our commitment to providing a \$15 minimum wage to part-time city employees and ensure that all city employees, part-time or full-time, as well as the contractors we hire, continue to receive a living wage beyond 2017.

I wholeheartedly support the work of the Durham Living Wage Project and its influence on the development of living wage practices across the city. Durham must commit to providing and supporting sustainable living wage jobs in the public and private sectors. City government has the leverage right now to add to its workforce incentives for businesses to hire locally and provide living wages, to encourage local manufacturing and black entrepreneurship. We also have a responsibility to prepare our workforce through targeted skills training, reduce barriers to employment that can compound the crisis of poverty, and to train people to become business owners, not just employees. More sustainable, living wage jobs and businesses will have a positive impact on individual economic stability as well as our tax base.

To address the racial wealth gap, we must create a system wherein people of color and low wage workers can realize financial stability. City government can take part in that by investing more in recruitment of businesses led by people of color, creating incentives for business creation and sustainability in communities of color and for existing businesses to engage and support businesses led by people of color, prioritizing partnerships with NCCU in a way that is comparable to the partnerships that the City engages in with Duke University, and providing more equitable employee benefits for part-time and full-time workers and demanding the same from contractors. Also, the City should follow the County's lead in providing 12 weeks of designated parental leave for all City employees.

3. Describe your interest in and commitment to public amenities such as playing fields, open space, street trees, traffic calming, and walking and biking facilities. Are you willing to raise property taxes to provide for and maintain these amenities? Are public amenities allocated to neighborhoods of different wealth and income levels equitably? Please explain and cite examples. *Please limit your answer to 500 words.*

I am fully committed to a diversity of public amenities, specifically expansion of walking and biking facilities. The city's current plan to review the need for sidewalks and the increased budget for sidewalk maintenance are good steps. I would support use of property taxes to create and maintain these amenities. However, the City should evaluate existing property tax allocation before resorting to property tax increases for these kinds of resources.

I have been troubled by lack of support by white communities for the presence and expansion of these kinds of amenities in low income communities and communities of color. For example, in August 2014, there was effort to re-zone between the Harmony Road and Woodcroft neighborhoods to connect a portion of the American Tobacco Trail. Before the vote, residents of Woodcroft, a predominately white community, objected to the rezoning, citing vague "safety" concerns, which were likely proxies for race and class-based bigotry and unfounded fear of being connected to a working class, black community. The progressive members of council voted for the rezoning while a majority of council voted against the rezoning. If we are going to tax all our citizens for these amenities, we have to advocate for them to be equally available in all of our communities.

4. How should the city measure the benefits and costs of incentives to promote development especially as those benefits and costs affect low-income residents of Durham? How would you use these measurements when deciding to vote for or against a proposed incentive? *Please limit your answer to 400 words.*

The city should evaluate the effectiveness of development incentives by whether or not the incentives provide sustainable support for low-income residents by:

- 1. relying first on needs of community to drive the city's policies around development incentives;*
- 2. reducing and/or mitigating property tax burdens, which can be measured by monitoring property tax rates, as well as the utilization and effectiveness of property tax subsidies;*
- 3. improving the quality and sustainability of their housing options which can be measured by the percentage of public land being utilized for affordable housing, the utilization of the dedicated housing fund as well as DHA-owned units;*
- 4. reducing eviction rates and displacement which can be measured by the rate at which private developers are voluntarily providing affordable housing, adherence to the city's commitment to percentages of affordable housing in private development, monitoring of eviction rates; and*
- 5. reducing housing code violations by providing maintenance support for landlords.*

I would rely on these measurements to guide decisions about providing incentives for development. The fundamental goal of development incentives, and anything we do in city government, should always be meeting the basic needs of all of our residents. How we develop is central to that fundamental goal and if a particular incentive fails to advance that goal, I will vote against it.

5. What actions should the city take to expand job creation and job quality? In your answer, please comment on the city's potential involvement in entrepreneurship, worker-owned cooperatives, and union organizing. *Please limit your answer to 400 words.*

Durham's involvement in entrepreneurship should be rooted in an investment in the capacity of its residents to support the local economy. The city should double down its job training and workforce development programs, including training programs offered at Durham Tech, the YouthWork program, and the NCWorks Career Center, to provide effective job training and encourage creation of jobs that meet the skills and needs of our communities, and increase its investment and rate of investment in entrepreneurs of color.

The city should provide incentives to new businesses to train and hire locally, and provide living wages and support community businesses through matching loan programs. The city should also provide incentives to companies that sell goods in Durham to manufacture those goods in Durham, and in turn, train and hire residents to occupy those jobs. Union organizing can play a vital role toward these goals by encouraging and ensuring safe and sustainable jobs, providing living wages, and giving voice and agency to workers rather than corporations. The city should support the rights of all workers.

Similarly, Durham should encourage and provide incentives for worker-owned cooperatives because the model increases the capacity of local businesses to thrive, diffuses the disproportionate influence of wealthy corporations, helping to make the city and other stakeholders more accountable to its people.

Housing, City Planning, and Neighborhoods

6. What does "gentrification" mean to you? What, if anything, should be done about it? How, if at all, is the issue of gentrification implicated in the Planning Department's current review of zoning in East Durham, the proposed creation of an Alston Avenue Design District, and the redevelopment of the former Fayette Place property? *Please limit your answer to 400 words.*

Gentrification replicates long-standing patterns of inequality under the guise of market function and business. It is not an inevitability.

Renewal and revitalization efforts by the city should be commended and further actions must be taken to prevent the gentrification of further communities in Durham. Some examples of actions the city can take include

- 1. Funding grants for businesses owned by people of color and otherwise proactively seek, nurture, and support black-owned businesses in order to ensure that revitalization efforts don't result in commercial districts with white-owned businesses catering to the white, middle- and affluent-class,*

2. *Revision of the strategic plan to detail how it will support vulnerable and minority communities and residents that have been exploited and displaced in the past and present, and*
3. *Tax relief programs are also an option when taxes rise in revitalized area and threaten to force-out long-time residents.*

Gentrification is currently present in Durham and is implicated in the review of zoning in East Durham (the Angier-Driver Rezoning Study) as well as the Alston Avenue Design District. Since revitalization in Durham has, historically, led to gentrification (Cleveland-Holloway, Downtown Business District) it stands to reason that revitalization in East Durham will result in the same. The city has put a lot of thought and effort into the rezoning study and design district ideas and has listened to the community. For instance, the need to have black-owned businesses in East Durham has been voiced. That said, listening to the community and hoping for the best is insufficient. The city must pro-actively prevent gentrification even as it seeks to nurture revitalization.

The implications for gentrification for the former Fayette Place property are less clear since a plan is not yet in place and different plans could have different outcomes. A concern for gentrification, however, should remain high even though the land is now in the hands of Durham's Housing Authority.

7. What should the city seek to accomplish through its power to stimulate and regulate growth? What principles and considerations will guide your decisions in zoning cases and other development issues? Illustrate your answer with a recent controversial zoning case. Did the city decide the case correctly? *Please limit your answer to 500 words.*

The city needs to continue its efforts to stimulate growth and revitalization in the ways it has proven very successful – but should do so for all communities, not just white, middle-class communities. The principles and considerations that will guide my decisions in zoning cases and other development issues include an analysis of whether a community is being left out or eventually forced out as a result of a decision, if all communities are considered for benefits as a result of development, and if a developer is eager to work with the city to meet its affordable housing goals. Additionally, I will consider the voices of those most directly impacted in the community.

For example, the Farrington Road case demonstrates the issues of development and affordable housing and the role the city plays in delivering the needed affordable housing to the community while encouraging growth. In order to meet the city's expected 15% affordable housing rate the developer would have needed to make 60 of the 400 projected units affordable. Instead they offered 20, a rate of only 5%. With the leverage in hand to approve or reject the developer's request to rezone in order to actualize the project the city failed to maximize new affordable housing opportunities in its quest to stimulate growth. While it's critical that the city work with developers to make Durham an appealing city in which to develop, it can't abdicate its responsibility to all citizens in favor of growth and the development community.

8. Does the city adequately fund its affordable housing plan? If no, what funding are you willing to fight for in the next budget for affordable homes for lower income Durham renters, homebuyers and homeowners? Where will the money come from? *Please limit your answer to 400 words.*

The new budget is a strong step in the right direction with additional resources being devoted to affordable housing. In particular, the additional 1 penny of property tax approved by City Council for FY

17-18 to be used for Dedicated Housing Fund is promising and demonstrates good faith and good intention to provide affordable housing. The increase, as well, of over 600% to the Community Development Department shows a commitment to communities that could benefit from access to affordable housing options. The City of Durham Affordable Housing Goals are commendable and, again, demonstrates the city's commitment to its citizens in need of affordable housing. That said, it remains to be seen if the Housing Fund Budget is sufficient to meet the high needs of affordable housing.

Some of the funding I would fight for include: property tax relief programs for low income homeowners, incentives for landlords to encourage acceptance of Section 8 vouchers from renters and reduce long waitlists, and reduced acquisition and maintenance fees for homeowners. The money for programs like these would likely come from property taxes, public-private partnerships, participating developers, federal funding, and grants.

9. Under what circumstances would you vote to approve a rezoning that does not include commitments to meet the city's affordable housing goal? If you answered yes, how would you ensure that the city meet its goal? Please illustrate your answer with a recent case. *Please limit your answer to 500 words.*

Not every rezoning will require a commitment to meet the city's affordable housing goals, though it's a pivotal way the city can do so - especially in light of state restriction and low federal funding. Expecting developers to meet the city's set goal of 15% of all units as affordable will be a benchmark, of course. But additional ways to ensure the city meets its goals for affordable housing include the option of paying in towards a housing fund, contributing land, and putting land in land trust for future use and permanent or time-linked affordability.

The City cannot mandate affordable housing as a condition of rezoning but I might vote to approve rezoning without commitments to meet the City's affordable housing goal in a situation where a development is designated to provide housing for a particular vulnerable community like the Denson Apartment for Veterans, which were developed to provide housing for disabled veterans.

Alternatively, other options could include: if a developer offers other amenities to the City like a park plan or green space instead of affordable housing, or a contribution to Dedicated Housing Fund that would allow the City to leverage that funding for a significant number of units beyond what the developer might have been able to provide in that particular project.

City Finances, Capital Improvements, Transportation, and City Services

10. If the city needs more revenue for a basic public service, do you, in general, favor a new or increased user fee or a property tax increase? Residential trash pickup is an example of a basic service. *Please limit your answer to 250 words.*

Durham ranks second among the state's largest cities in combined city and county property taxes and user fee rates, including an average of almost \$700 in user fees per household annually. In general, I do not favor increased user fees or increased property taxes. User fees are burdensome and discourage access to public services for some residents. Fees for basic city services like yard waste pick-up, should be reconsidered to determine if they can be offered at no cost to homeowners.

That said, should the city need additional revenue for basic services, I would support property tax increases. Property tax increases have to be considered carefully and appropriately mitigated based on affordability for lower income residents.

11. Do you support or oppose Durham's plans for rail-based transit? If federal funding for the project is denied, what must Durham do about transportation, urban planning, housing, taxes, and infrastructure? Please limit your answer to 500 words.

I support rail-based transit. Rail-based transit helps create cleaner air, more walkable communities, and generally has the potential to have a positive impact on our environmental sustainability. The expected capacity of the Durham rail system to connect to the future commuter rail and bus systems in Chapel Hill, where many of our residents commute, is a valuable aspect of our light rail plan.

Implementation of a rail-based transit system in Durham should come with a commitment from city government to make the system affordable and accessible for the communities that utilize public transportation most. The stops in the current plan cradle Duke University and only extend eastward to NCCU. It is critical that future development of Durham's light rail prioritize more stops in East and South Durham.

Investment in a rail system is critical to Durham's commitment to all of its communities, particularly those who rely heavily on public transportation. If the nearly 50% federal funding is denied, Durham could do a number of things to maintain the viability of the project:

- 1. revise the current plan to rely less on federal funding,*
 - 2. reduce the number of stops in the initial phase of light rail project to reduce the overall cost of the project and stretch the current percentage of city funding,*
 - 3. the City could evaluate whether or not GoTriangle can borrow more to fund the project,*
 - 4. the City should challenge the cap on state funding for new light-rail projects in hopes of getting more than 10% of total cost from the state,*
 - 5. renegotiate cost allocation with Orange County, for instance, propose delaying the North-South Bus Transit project in Orange County in order to free up funds that Orange County could dedicate to the rail system, and*
- 1) seek additional up front funding from Durham County.*

Generally, the city has to also combat displacement in urban areas by increasing affordable housing stock near existing bus lines in order to maximize usage of existing public transportation. Durham should continue to improve the public transportation currently available to residents by making the bus system free for all residents and transitioning the current fleet to all environmentally sustainable buses.

12. Has the city's investment in bus transportation reached the population which needs it most? What else can be done to improve bus transportation access and affordability? Please limit your answer to 400 words.

The City has made great efforts to increase access to our bus system. The City's current plan to add bus access on Holloway Street and Fayetteville Street, increase hours of operation by 41,000, and invest in sidewalks are important steps. However, physical accessibility, while an important part, is only a part of the picture. The City has to invest in making bus transportation affordable in order to reach the

populations that need it most; this includes expanding the route of the Bull City Connector to NCCU or other locations rather than just serving Duke and the downtown area, ultimately making the bus system fare-free to all riders.

The City should engage the community about their specific transportation needs and continue work to add bus stops, improve the quality of bus stations, and increase the frequency of routes in areas that need it.

13. Would you support a property tax relief program, for example, a circuit breaker, to reduce the tax burden on homeowners with limited resources and help them stay in their homes? If your answer is yes, please describe the program or programs you would support. If your answer is no, please explain. *Please limit your answer to 400 words.*

Yes, I would support a property tax relief program. Property taxes are creating increasingly higher barriers to homeownership in Durham. I would support:

- 1. Giving grants to homeowners to subsidize acquisition and maintenance fees,*
- 2. Creating property tax exemptions for certain homeowners,*
- 3. Having an income-based property tax subsidy but without burdensome demographic, and requirements or deferred payments found with a circuit breaker plans that could lead to the further burden of tax liens. Instead, if the city has to collect those taxes, the rates for higher income households could be increased.*

Policing and Public Safety

14. 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, deployment of personnel, searches, and communication with the public? *Please limit your answer to 400 words.*

Yes, city government has a problem trusting the capacity of our people to create safe communities. The police department has a problem trusting the reality that everyone is equal and deserving of life, humane treatment, and justice. The people of Durham have a problem trusting the idea that everyone deserves safety and a place in our community.

No, I am not satisfied with the department's response to the issues listed above. In every category, people of color in Durham are targeted, harassed, arrested, detained, searched, jailed, and shot at disproportionate rates compared to whites. The department and its officers have be held accountable for their conduct, train officers in appropriate de-escalation techniques, conduct more effective screening measures for candidates, and improve the quality and urgency in their communication with the public.

Also, the Citizen Police Review Board needs direct oversight and enforcement power over the police department.

Finally, how we approach the safety of our children reflects - solely - on us as adults. Our children, particularly children of color, experience trauma, impacts to their education, and physical harm from over-policing in their communities and their schools. It is inexcusable and immoral, and it's destroying lives. The City has to commit to a different approach that removes criminality from the discipline in our schools, recognizes our responsibility to do the work to meet the educational and social needs of all of

our children, and that supports children in crisis, whether it be behavioral, mental or physical health, home stability, transportation, or food.

15. To what degree, if any, should the city cooperate with U.S. Department of Immigration & Customs Enforcement? Should the city become a sanctuary city? If your answer is yes, for whom should the city provide sanctuary and by what means should sanctuary be provided? If your answer is no, please explain your reasons. In either case, please be specific. *Please limit your answer to 400 words.*

The city should not cooperate with ICE for a number of reasons. First, our undocumented residents are a valued part of this city. Second, ICE deportation efforts in Durham and elsewhere tear apart families, encourage racial profiling and harassment by law enforcement, and often result in harassment, and excessive use of force. Third, detaining undocumented folks perpetuates the broader problem of mass incarceration of people of color to no end other than adding to the loss, trauma, and burdens of low income communities. Finally, it's clear that cooperation with federal deportation efforts makes communities less likely to attend school, seek vital health services, and report crime, including domestic violence matters, for fear of deportation.

The recently passed HB 318 is unconstitutional because it infringes on the discretionary authority of local law enforcement. The constitutionality of that bill notwithstanding, Durham should become a sanctuary city. Durham should provide sanctuary for all people of color, LGBTQ people, and all undocumented persons living in Durham. Durham has a current policy of not asking about a resident's immigration status and Chief Davis recently committed to no longer conducting traffic checkpoints (despite continuing to participate in multi-jurisdictional checkpoints). The city should further commit to not investigating a resident's immigration status including at the jail, enact a moratorium on low level traffic stops, separate local police from immigration enforcement, not engage in 287(g) agreement, invest in communities rather than police, and improve officer training.

16. Should the city allocate more, less, or about the same money to policing? Please explain your answer. If your answer is less, would you allocate more money to other services to improve public safety? Again, please explain. *Please limit your answer to 400 words.*

The City should allocate less money to policing. The issue is less about the amount than it is about what we invest in and how we spend the money that matters. We should allocate money to securing jobs, vital health services, accessibility, youth engagement, educational and empowerment opportunities. Ultimately, investing in our people rather than our policing efforts; which only entrench racism and create trauma, mental illness, collateral consequences for those involved in the criminal justice system, loss economic and educational opportunity, shattered families, and resources, wasted on efforts that create more problems than they solve.

Civil Rights

17. Name one issue in Durham that directly impacts, or is directly impacted by, race inequity and how can the city incorporate a race equity framework in addressing this issue? *Please limit your answer to 400 words.*

City council appears inaccessible to non-English speaking residents. If an entire community isn't able to participate in local government because they don't feel welcome, then their voice will continue to go

unheard and their priorities will be cut out of the decision-making process. This is especially troubling in a time when our immigrant community is under attack - both from the harsh invectives of our current president and from ICE. The City can incorporate a race equity framework by providing interpretation services at city council meetings, work sessions, TV broadcasts and records, as well as translated versions of City Council minutes, agendas and supporting documentation. Virtually every issue that comes before the City touches non-English speaking residents, from housing, policing, public services and amenities, and taxes. The City should work to make their decision-making processes more accessible.

18. If the city could adopt an ordinance concerning the civil rights of members of the LGBTQ community, what provisions should that ordinance contain? *Please limit your answer to 400 words.*

First, the city should be vocal in its opposition to HB142 and its sunset provision, and express support for the LGBTQ community.

The ordinance should prohibit discrimination based on race, color, ancestry, national origin, place of birth, citizenship status, sex, age, religion, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression. The ordinance should apply to:

- 1. Employment, including hiring/firing, expulsion, and classification,*
- 2. Housing, including termination, eviction, initiation, lending, advertising, or facility restriction,*
- 3. Business establishments and public accommodations, including enjoyment of goods and services, admittance, advertising, toilet facilities, and charging practices, and*
- 4. Policing, including traffic stops, searches, arrests, database searches, jail segregation, fees, access to basic needs.*

Personal and Political

19. Have you ever been convicted of a criminal offence other than a minor traffic offense? If your answer to this question is yes, please describe the charge or charges, the circumstances, and the outcome. *Please limit your answer to 250 words.*

I have never been convicted of a criminal offense other than traffic citations.

20. For whom did you vote in the 2012 and 2016 presidential and gubernatorial elections? For whom did you vote in the 2014 U. S. Senate election? *Please limit your answer to 100 words.*

I think voting histories are personal and that compelling their disclosure can have a chilling effect on the democratic process. That said, in the 2012, 2014, and 2016 elections, I voted for the Democratic candidates on the ballot.