**August 3rd Work Session**

**Citizen Comments**

1. **Sally Hodges-Copple**

I am writing to voice my support for tax assistance grants to help low-income homeowners keep their homes. From what I understand, this policy gives homeowners security from tax foreclosure, while the alternative option (deferring delinquent taxes), requires homeowners to pay with 9% interest and fees, putting low-income families at greater risk of losing their home. I hope the County will join the City in supporting tax assistance grants to keep longtime Durhamites in their homes.

Thank you for your work on behalf of our community

1. **Jenna Funicella, Konstantin Bakhurin, Jen Eisenmann**

Thank you for your tireless efforts and leadership in this very challenging time for our community. I'm sure you are all well aware of how the pandemic has revealed and exacerbated long-standing problems, including affordable housing. While much of the focus lately has rightly been on preventing a coming eviction crisis for renters, low income homeowners, especially those of color, also face a double burden.

I urge you to enact tax assistance grants for longtime, low-income homeowners. This policy will help fight displacement and gentrification, since homeowners whose taxes rise faster than their incomes may be forced to sell their homes to pay taxes. As you may know, research shows that African American homes nationwide are consistently assessed at higher values, relative to their actual sale price, than white-owned homes. This results in African American homeowners in the best of times bearing an unfair share of the burden of paying for local government and now facing potential displacement in these worst of times.

1. **Jen Eisenmann**

It has come to my attention that you negotiated with City Council to appoint the Sheriff and Police Chief to an "advisory board" for the Community Safety and Wellness Task Force. Our communities do not need the police to advise them about what systems will keep them safe; they know what’s best for them and should be free to work together to develop their ideas without police oversight. I view the Commission’s proposal as its own form of policing - intervening in this critical process to enforce a vision of Durham’s future in which “new” systems of safety are premised on the same logics of crime, punishment, and anti-Blackness.

I am imploring you to develop the Community Safety and Wellness Task Force with NO police involvement at your next meeting on August 10. We have been under police control since the founding of Durham - they have had their say. Our communities know the way forward. We only need to let them lead.

1. **Karen Blase**

We must support racial equity through ACTION. Enact tax assistance grants for longtime, low-income homeowners NOW. We cannot just march and chant our way to equity, we must act our way to racial equity.

1. **Sadie Nott**

I'm writing to you to implore you not to assign any members of the Durham Police or Sheriff's Departments to the newly established Community Safety and Wellness Taskforce. In order for this entity to truly be free from the confines of systemic racism and this county and city's history of policing and violence against black and brown bodies, we must let the communities themselves speak for what their needs are.

Please take this opportunity and allow Durham continue to grow and be a beacon of progressiveness and light on these issues.

1. **Tom Harris**

This comment from the Criminal Justice Reform Action Team of Durham CAN (Congregations, Neighborhoods and Associations) is a follow up to the email message sent by Rev. Timothy Condor, Co-Chair of both the Durham CAN Strategy Team and Clergy Council, on June 12, 2020, to the Durham County Commissioners requesting sufficient funding be provided to Sheriff Birkhead to allow universal COVID-19 testing for both staff and residents at the Durham County Detention Center. As Rev. Condor explained, we see this commitment to testing as urgent for his staff, the approximately 260 residents of the jail, and our broader community. The Sheriff has informed us that he has had ten positive cases among his staff and had tragically lost a team member to COVID-19. Currently, they are only minimally testing. In fact, as we understand it, the current policy requires his staff to individually seek testing through their own insurance coverage or personal resources.

We have recently learned through contacts with the NC Office of State Budget and Management and NCPRO that Durham County has either recently or will soon receive its second round of CARES Act funding, in the amount of $6,239,422. Moreover, Jodi Miller, Durham County Safety General Manager, has informed us that the County Commission has not yet adopted a plan for the expenditure of those funds. When you do adopt that plan, we urge you to include sufficient funds for universal COVID-19 testing for both staff and residents, current and future, at the Durham County Detention Center. Both Sheriff Birkhead and County Health Director Rodney Jenkins have informed us that they will assure these tests are administered if they receive CARES Act fund earmarked for that purpose.

For your additional information, Ms. Miller also informed us of the need for the County to check the CFR guidelines to ascertain whether the purposes for which we ask you to expend the County’s CARES Act fund are permissible. Our own research shows they are permissible. On page 4 of the guidelines, under "Nonexclusive examples of eligible expenditures," two of the expenses listed are " Costs of providing COVID-19 testing, including serological testing" and" COVID-19-related expenses of maintaining state prisons and county jails."

1. **Charles Cooperberg**

Please slow down changes to Durham’s UDO, rushing is not appropriate

1. **Carl Rist**

Attached to this email (sent on August 2nd) is a sign-on letter from a number of individuals, neighborhood associations, and civic organizations in Durham that urges the Board of County Commissioners to provide direct tax assistance to long-time, low-income homeowners. Doing so will be an important way to fight displacement and gentrification, while also building wealth for Black homeowners, who have long borne a disproportionate share of the burden of paying for local government (see below for estimates of the Black homeownership rate by Census tract for Durham County).

We look forward to further deliberation on this proposal at Monday morning's work session of the county commissioners.

1. **Brian Vannah**

As a Durham resident, my wish for the Community Safety and Wellness Task Force is to create a safer and healthier community. I want to keep police, including the Sheriff and Police Chief, away from this Task Force. Their input is not needed. The community knows how to keep the community safe better than the police who have spent decades harming it.

Even if they don't get to vote, allowing the police to sway discussions is counterproductive to the goals of the task force. The Police Department and Sheriff have so much power in our city--they do not need the extra boost that they would enjoy as advisors to the task force.

I believe that the researchers on the task force will be able to obtain any information they need regarding things like crime statistics, arrest patterns, etc. from law enforcement agencies outside of the task force meetings, so there would be no need for the police to be present in meetings.

I urge you to ensure that law enforcement be kept out of this discussion entirely as our community grapples with systems of legal oppression.

I am writing to urge the Durham County Board of Commissioners to approve a cop-free Durham Community-Led Safety and Wellness Task Force and its bylaws at your next meeting. Again, I urge you not to include the Sheriff, Sheriff’s Deputies, or any police-related workers as County representatives or advisors on this Task Force because that would defeat the Task Force's purpose--to move beyond reactive, short-term solutions using a punishment or imprisonment framework.

1. **Rita McDaniel**

My name is Rita McDaniel I’m not a homeowner but would like to be one someday. I’m asking that you all will approve grants to help low income homeowners keep their homes. Can you imagine years ago how these families felt being able to buy a home that they can call their own? What a feeling of accomplishment! But as they have aged and our communities have changed having the feeling of being overwhelmed with the fear of losing their home having not enough money for food medicine and other essential needs. I’m asking that you all will vote yes and help many people of low income stay in their homes with the pride of knowing that our County Commissioners are invested in the people who have invested back by raising their families and being able to pay their taxes in their early years.

1. **Manisha Dubey**

As a Durham resident, my wish for the Community Safety and Wellness Task Force is to create a safer and healthier community. I want to keep police, including the Sheriff and Police Chief, away from this Task Force. Their input is not needed. The community knows how to keep the community safe better than the police who have spent decades harming it.

The relationship of this advisory board to the taskforce is not made clear enough in my opinion and could easily become an overpowering force that could influence the work of the taskforce because of unavoidable power structures that those law enforcement or other department leaders embody/can wield. Another glaring contradiction this raises for me is the assumption that these leaders would not make themselves available to any community member as a resource/support if they were not serving on such a taskforce like the community safety and wellness taskforce or if these officials were not serving in this "resource/advisory panel". It seems like formalizing a relationship between these departments and the community work in a way that could be easily construed as power and control rather than recognizing that of course and obviously these department leaders should always make themselves available as a resource and advisors to community work when called upon.

I am writing to urge the Durham County Board of Commissioners to approve a cop-free Durham Community-Led Safety and Wellness Task Force and its bylaws at your next meeting. Again, I urge you not to include the Sheriff, Sheriff’s Deputies, or any police-related workers as County representatives or advisors on this Task Force because that would defeat the Task Force's purpose--to move beyond reactive, short-term solutions using a punishment or imprisonment framework.

1. **Sarah Bickley**

I strongly oppose text amendment #TC2000003, which create a new process for development called “Development Agreements.” These Development Agreements (DAs) allow developers to strike deals with the Planning Department behind closed doors, with no resident input. Durham residents are already struggling to have our voices heard- these DAs will make Developer voices even stronger while actual Durham residents are left out in the cold. Under a DA, residents will not hear about new developments until they are before City Council/County Commission when the deal has already been struck. Now, more than ever, we should be empowering our residents- not shutting our voices out of conversations that guide the future of Durham.

I specifically oppose text amendment # TC2000003 (Development Agreements) because this proposed amendment removes the voices of Durham residents from the table and strengthens a structure that prioritizes the voices of wealthy & well-connected developers over those of current residents.

We need more transparency in government, not less. This text amendment will hurt Durham’s ability to engage minority voices and help us plan for our own future.

This text amendment has no limits and can be used on a project of any size (from a single home to a multi-million dollar development), fundamentally undermining our current rules and regulations.

This text amendment is being proposed and rushed through to help a specific developer. City policy should be made thoughtfully and deliberately to benefit all residents, and not rushed through to benefit a single person.

This proposal should be separated from the specific rezoning case #Z1900036 on Farrington Rd. Having the deadline for a massive change to the UDO should not be driven by whatever deadlines a single developer has requested.

This is another example of Developers promising affordable housing, but not being willing to give up even a little of their profits. The more we keep allowing developers to rewrite our code, the more we will attract developers who care mostly about profits and not about Durham.

I urge you to against this proposed text amendment.

1. **Stella Adams**

My name is Stella Adams and I urge The Passage of the long-term Durham Resident Tax Assistance Grant Program put forward by the Coalition for Affordable Housing and Transit. A map provided by the National Community Reinvestment Coalition that has been previously provided to Commissioners shows that a significant portion of Durham County has a Black Homeownership rate of 75%. This is far above the national average and this land has been in the Black community for nearly 100 years. The loss of this land due to an inequitable tax valuation would be a travesty and a breach of your obligation to affirmatively further fair housing.

Rural farmers in Durham county would also benefit from this program. Many family farmers have lost income for reasons beyond their control, tariffs, and COVID-19 are hardships they could not anticipate. These family farms are in danger and these landowners would benefit from the relief a Long-term Durham Resident Tax Assistance Grant Program would provide them during these exceptional times.

Our long-term residents are the people who built this county, they built homes here and raised their families here. This County owes them and should not be responsible for their land loss. I strongly urge you to provide relief to these long-term residents of our county.

1. **Cole Parke**

I work as a community organizer with a statewide organization called Carolina Jews for Justice, and I'm a resident of Durham, NC. I'm proud to call this city and this community my home, and I'm mindful, too, that a significant part of what makes this place so special long predates my relatively recent arrival. As a matter of both honoring the longtime members of this community that made it what it is -- especially poor, working class, Black, and Latinx people -- and investing in a racially just society, I'm writing to encourage the Board to enact tax assistance grants for longtime, low-income homeowners.

1. **Lorisa Seibel**

Dear County Commissioners, County Clerk, County Manager, General Manager of Financial Affairs, and Tax Assessor,

In 2019, tax values rose 79% in the East End neighborhood (North Durham on Dowd Street). When Tax Values Rose 56% in 2016, this historically Black neighborhood lost African Americans, lost homeowners, and lost population. In 2016, cost-burdened mortgage holders rose to 81%. In 2017, evictions spiked at 511, half the population. This is happening in all of the historic African American neighborhoods in Durham, both rural and urban.

In 2020, we can act to help homeowners and residents of the East End and other rapidly gentrifying neighborhoods keep their homes.

We ask you to fund Grants to support Long-Time, Low-Income Homeowners in gentrifying neighborhoods keep their homes. Please support the Coalition for Affordable Housing and Transit proposed Tax Assistance Grants.

Please see the attached data showing the loss of long-time, low-income homeowners in the East End.

1. **Jim Svara**

I would like to commend the Commissioners for considering how the County can join with the City to provide tax assistance to very low-income long-term homeowners.

Taxes are rising for these families but incomes do not. These conditions can lead to additional displacement of longtime homeowners and destabilization of their neighborhoods. The proposed Tax Assistance Grant (TAG) program helps long-time homeowners Countywide with incomes below 30% AMI and target neighborhoods and Habitat homeowners up to 60% AMI.

The Program will limit payments by the eligible homeowners to one percent of their income (two percent for the target groups). The amount of tax that exceeds the limit will be paid by a grant to the Tax Administration Office from the City and County.

The Deferred Payment approach also provides relief, but TAG provides more assistance and does not require repayment of deferred taxes plus interest. We need to get this program in place to help with this year’s taxes. Please see the longer attached comments.

1. **Tamara Oxley**

It is inequitable that the poorest members of our community pay the highest percentage of their income to property tax. Our county must be in the business of ensuring that the investments that homeowners make in their homes are secure – rather than financially crippling low-income community members with increasing, prohibitive property taxes that threaten to remove them from their own homes.

Tax assistance grants are an important immediate step but they are unsustainable. Instead, Durham citizens want the Board to consider longer-term options that take into account and address the generational impact of increasing property taxes on low-income residents. The county must act to keep property taxes affordable for low-income homeowners – it is immoral to casually and continuously price residents out of their own homes in the communities they have contributed to for years, decades, or generations.

1. **Kathi Beratan**

I am writing in support of the People’s Alliance request that you support tax assistance grants to keep taxes affordable for low-income homeowners. Affordable housing is a central concern in Durham, so finding ways to help low-income people stay in their current homes should be an important focus. Tax assistance grants are one way that the City can help low-income homeowners keep their houses through the growing economic crisis. It can also begin to correct a long-standing inequity in property assessments here and across the nation resulting in the poorest homeowners paying a disproportionately high percentage of their income in property taxes. Tax assistance grants could give low-income homeowners long-term security from tax foreclosure and help them start to build wealth. Much more needs to be done to assist low-income communities, of course, including updating Durham's ordinances and permitting process to give communities a voice in development decisions, but this proposal is a good start.

1. **Brandon Williams**

As a concerned Durham resident who lives in the Walltown neighborhood, I urge you to adopt a countywide tax assistance grant program (in partnership with the City of Durham) to provide urgently needed financial support for long-time, low-income homeowners. I share the views of the Coalition for Affordable Housing and Transit, Durham People's Alliance, and Durham Committee on the Affairs of Black People whose letter articulates this program as a matter of equity (addressing racial disparities in property tax burden), urgent financial need (in context of COVID-19), and public good (aligns with goals of the Durham County Strategic Plan).

Moreover, the Walltown Community Association has been requesting property tax relief for some time now, most recently articulating it as part of our vision for the redevelopment of Northgate Mall. We know that what happens with the mall property will only exacerbate the burden of long-time, low-income homeowners in our neighborhood and believe these grants can help offset that impact.

Please take the necessary action to support this initiative and secure funding for it in the FY 20-21 budget.

1. **Breana van Velzen**

I hope you are well. I live in Walltown, which is an historically Black neighborhood, and I work with several other historically Black neighborhoods in the city and county. Homeowners have been hit with much higher property taxes. I would not like to see my neighbors displaced, rent prices go up further, or people unable to make repairs on their homes due to taxation. I want our neighborhoods to retain their character and residents. Especially during this time of crisis, please pass the tax assistance grant program—help our community in a very concrete way that will allow for the least amount of displacement, especially for senior citizens. We don’t have many options left for our collective thriving as more and more well-paid young professionals move into luxury housing in Durham. We have to take responsibility for all of our residents.