

March 8, 2021 – Public Comments for Agenda Item

These comments were received between 12:22pm – 4:57pm. All comments after 5pm were not shared live but are mentioned below.

21-0182 –The Durham County Attorney Seeks Approval to Contract with Consultants to Begin a Process of Trainings for the BOCC in the Area of Building Consensus around Controversial Issues

1. Nicholas Graber-Grace

I intend this to be both an email to Commissioners and a Public Comment for tonight's County Commission meeting. I see that tonight's County Commission Agenda includes an item that I am very concerned about -- a proposed contract with The Robert Bobb Group.

According to the agenda document, County Manager Wendell Davis (and County Attorney Lowell Siler) are recommending that Durham County hire the Robert Bobb group to "assist the County Board of Commissioners in working more effectively." I want to make sure you are each aware that Robert Bobb is a school privatizer who is infamous for the hatchet job he did on Detroit Public Schools from 2009-2011, where he closed 29 schools, eliminated hundreds of school counseling jobs, poured public dollars into a bunch of private sector firms, and proposed converting 41 Detroit Public Schools into privately run charter schools. This guy has deep ties to the Broad Foundation, which is infamous for pushing a privatization agenda. He seems to be super divisive and anti-union, and definitely not the kind of unifying presence we would want working to improve dynamics within our Durham County Commission.

Either Manager Davis and Attorney Siler are way out of step with Durham's values, or they utterly failed to do due diligence on who Robert Bobb is when his group applied for this contract. Either way, it's a real bad look and I call on Chair Brenda Howertonto shut this down immediately. We can surely find someone to offer board training who does not have a demonstrated track record of being anti-union and attacking public institutions.

Here are some receipts to let you know a bit about Bobb's record. He is definitely fancy and well connected, but not for the right reasons.

<https://www.forbes.com/.../michigan-emergency-manager.../...>

https://www.mlive.com/.../detroit_schools_send_layoff_pa...

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Bobb#cite_note-forbes-2

<https://www.prwatch.org/.../billionaire-eli-broad-takes...>

<https://www.broadcenter.org/.../dire.../profile/robert-bobb/>

Thank you for your attention to this matter. I look forward to hearing back from each of you, and I hope you find this information helpful in your deliberative process.

2. Millicent Rogers

As a Durham community member, I question the idea that there is a sense of urgency to call for the approval of this contract at this time. The Coleman Report was released publicly in August of 2020, we can all agree that there are issues that will require outside

expertise. County officials, specifically the County Attorney has waited six months to make a recommendation on who organization that would be, and now finds that it is so urgent that there can't be proper RFP process can't be followed. There is not anymore urgency around this manner now that the new commissioners are in place. There should be the ability for other agencies to be considered, there has been ample time for the County Attorney to consult others during this period for presentation to the Board of County Commission, the public requires you all to request due diligence in this process--it is necessary for the advice an intervention to come from a well prepared, well vetted agency. This work can't be rushed, and the Commissioners all deserve to see the applications from top tier firms.

DO NOT rush into an agreement with the Bobb group, get more quotes and more options for Durham leadership.

3. **Michelle Burton**

It has come to my attention that for tonight's Durham County Commissioner meeting that there will be discussion about the approval of a contract with Mr. Robert Bobb and his consulting firm.

From what I know about Mr. Bobb, he was hired by the State of Michigan to be an emergency manager for the Detroit Public Schools and he was charged with eliminating a significant deficit situation for the Detroit Public Schools, closing a large portion of the public schools in Detroit and turning those schools into charter schools, and firing and eliminating teaching positions in the city of Detroit. The decisions that Mr. Bobb made had real world consequences because one of my colleagues and good friends that I taught with in Wake County came to teach in North Carolina from Detroit due to the turmoil of what was happening in that city during the exact time Mr. Bobb was the emergency manager.

Even though Mr. Bobb would not be doing specific work with regards to public schools here in Durham County, it does not send a very good message to the citizens of Durham County, a county that had to push back on the privatization and takeover of two DPS schools by private charter organizations back in 2017, Lakewood Elementary and Glenn Elementary, that our County Commissioners would consider hiring a consulting firm that believes in the practice of privatization of public goods and services. It just does not look good.

Please read Mr. Bobb's Wikipage which gives a great overview of the work that he did in the City of Detroit.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Bobb#cite_note-WT-12

I would ask that you would not hire Mr. Bobb's consulting firm and that you would look to another firm that can meet the needs of the Durham County Commissioners and the citizens of Durham County. I know there are other reputable consulting firms out there that do not believe in the privatization of public goods and services and who would better meet the needs of our citizens and community.

4. **Millie (millierosen14@gmail.com)**

I write to you as a Durham resident to strongly urge you not to employ the services of the Robert Bobb Group as proposed in tonight's agenda. According to this agenda item, the RBG Team's services will be employed to help the Commission and its staff "be more efficient in policy deliberations and to have more effective communications between the Board and the staff concerning policies and procedures, roles and responsibilities. The overall desired result is to have a more effective and efficient County Government."

Here are the reasons I do not support the BOCC employing the RBG Team:

1. This consulting firm is headed by Robert Bobb, who was hired in 2009 to be an emergency manager of the Detroit Public Schools. During his tenure there, he closed many schools, fired a number of teachers and eliminated teaching positions, and turned many other schools into charters, which as we know use public money but are not publicly accountable. Mr. Bobb also left the system with a much larger debt than when he came in.
2. Durham County has had to deal with the threat of privatization many times coming from the state level. In 2017, DAE led a campaign that was successful in stopping the takeover of Glenn and Lakewood Elementaries. To hire a consulting firm that believes in the privatization of public services like public schools does not send a good message to the residents of Durham, nor the employees of DPS. A significant percentage of DPS, especially classified staff, are people of color (and women), and institutional racism affects them daily through their wages (which were just raised by the Commission, a great move on your part) as well as the consideration given to them by DPS and the BOCC. Anyone brought in to consult the County Commission should not have a history of bringing negative impacts to public school employees, like Mr. Bobb does.
3. This item also appears to have been added to the agenda very recently - I would ask Ms. Toomer, who is copied on this email, if she'd be so kind as to tell us when the item (21-0182) was added. If it was within the last couple days, that does not seem like enough time for all five commissioners to properly research and vet the consulting firm before being asked to vote on it tonight - and that's a lot of funding from the BOCC that is being considered.

It is clear to me that this vote is about more than a consulting firm. It's about Durham's values, as embodied by its County Commission. How can the Commission hire someone to advise them on "policy deliberations" and "effective communication" who so clearly does not align with our values as a community? Who does not value public school workers and students?

I ask that you hold off on this vote and give more time in the search for a consulting firm that does its work from a place of racial, social, and economic justice, and that does not believe in the privatization of public schools. Such a group would meet the needs of both the BOCC and Durham's community at large.

Thank you for your time. I have included sources for all my factual statements below.

5. Beth Newsome

I write to you as a citizen of Durham county and the parent of a DPS student. Please reject the recommendation from the Durham County Manager and Attorney to hire Robert Bobb and his consulting firm. He is well known as a proponent of school privatization, not what we want in Durham where we successfully fought off the proposed charter takeover of Lakewood and Glenn elementary schools in 2017. This is quite simply an awful fit with our community.

Comments Received After 5pm

Tamara Bartreau – 5:30pm

I am a long-time citizen of Durham County. And I am very concerned about this apparently last-minute agenda item regarding the hiring of a consultant.

Why would the Board hire someone to advise them on "policy deliberations" and "effective communication" who so clearly does not align with our values as a community? Who does not value public school workers and students? I write this knowing the background of Robert Bobb and his firm. For example, Robert Bobb, who was hired in 2009 to be an emergency manager of the Detroit Public Schools. During his tenure there, he closed many schools, fired a number of teachers and eliminated teaching positions, and turned many other schools into charters, which as we know use public money but are not publicly accountable. Mr. Bobb also left the system with a much larger debt than when he came in. To hire a consulting firm that believes in the privatization of public services like public schools does not send a good message to the residents of Durham, nor the employees of DPS.

Please reject the recommendation from the Durham County Manager and Attorney to hire Robert Bobb and his consulting firm. He is well known as a proponent of school privatization, not what we want in Durham where we successfully fought off the proposed charter takeover of Lakewood and Glenn elementary schools in 2017. This is quite simply an awful fit with our community.

Erica Briola – 8:25pm

Please reconsider the use of Robert Bobb Group for board consultation and training.

As a DPS parent and Durham resident, I would like to see consultation for building consensus on challenging topics be led by a group more reflective of our values in Durham.

The Durham Public School district has a lot to overcome, especially with the hits it has taken during the pandemic, but consulting with a company run by a gentleman who fought hard for privatization and charters is not a way to build towards a better district.