



# **Durham County 2021**

## **State of the County Address**

### **Video Part 1**

Delivered by Chair Brenda Howerton  
October 2021

Hello, I am Brenda Howerton, Chair of the Durham Board of County Commissioners. It is my pleasure to bring to you the first of a series of messages that will comprise a new version of the State of the County.

Most of you will remember the time when the Chair of the Board would bring this annual message to Durham County residents during a regular Commissioners meeting. Normally, I would be speaking in our Board Chambers and joined by my fellow commissioners, county administrators, department heads, and members of the public to review the accomplishments from the past year.

But as you know, the past year and a half has challenged all of us to make changes, and to rethink the word "normal".

Over the next few weeks, I will bring you a series of messages to showcase what your Durham County Government has done during the pandemic, an overview of our approved budget, and finally, I will talk about how we are moving forward to help our community recover from

the pandemic and our plans to use ARPA funds from the federal government.

My goal is to showcase the crucial work that was performed by our 2,000 plus Durham County employees and community partners to help manage life during this most difficult, challenging, and extraordinary period.

Let's begin the review, shall we?

Planning for the pandemic began behind the scenes in January 2020 when our Emergency Management team and Public Health staff, led by our new Director Rod Jenkins started working with State Public Health officials to monitor **COVID 19**. At this point, we'd heard only a little about Coronavirus, mostly in the world news reports.

That work involved activating preparedness efforts for communities as the disease began to take shape. **Public Health** also began to message CDC advice regarding the critical precautions everyone should take to avoid the disease.

Then in early March, a **Cyber Attack** hit both Durham County and the City of Durham. Our IS&T Director Greg Marrow and his counterpart at the City spoke to the public about the incident and the impact. They announced that **no taxpayer or employee personal data** had been compromised in the attack. It was a well-known cyber threat that had hit other governments but fortunately, there was no demand for money.

With our Emergency Operations Center activated, Emergency Management coordinated state resources, including the National Guard cybersecurity team. Emergency Management staff secured additional laptops, Cradlepoints, and WiFi systems from AT&T and Verizon; obtained laptop computers from neighboring counties, Dell, and State IT agencies so that County and City staff could continue to operate.

Emergency Management hosted daily, and then weekly coordination calls with City and County IT staff, State IT, Microsoft, National Guard, and others. As we recovered, that schedule continued with City and County officials and staff as we began to focus on ever rising cases of COVID-19.

As Coronavirus continued to spread, Governor Roy Cooper issued an executive order declaring a state of emergency. That meant Emergency Operations Centers, including our own, continued to develop response plans, and take the necessary steps to keep residents safe and healthy.

We soon began to see COVID 19 cases in the Triangle and in Durham County. Workers from the RTP attending a convention in the northeast, returned home and a few were diagnosed with Coronavirus.

In a few more days, a group of university students returned from spring break in the middle east with coronavirus.

That began our intense efforts to inform the community about this growing public health threat. **Slow the spread** and **flatten the curve** became new terms we heard daily from our experts.

Public Health staff increased its work to identify positive cases, and to coordinate with the medical community to aggressively attack this pandemic.

Coronavirus was officially **declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization on March 11<sup>th</sup>**. **On March 13<sup>th</sup>**, a national emergency was declared in the United States.

As schools transitioned from in person to virtual, employees from Durham County and Durham Public School System set up a daily feeding program for families whose students were on free and reduced lunch. This continued throughout the rest of the school year.

Durham County issued a Declaration of Emergency on March 14<sup>th</sup> and Governor Cooper's Executive Order shut down all state libraries, including in Durham County, Sunday March 15<sup>th</sup>

Our County Manager ordered all Durham County offices closed to the public beginning March 23<sup>rd</sup> due to the twin impact of coronavirus and recovery from the March 6<sup>th</sup> cyber malware attack.

Our Board of Commissioners suspended our meetings between March 23 until April 13<sup>th</sup>. At that time, we transitioned into the world of **Zoom** meetings like so many other elected Boards and Councils.

In the early days of this crisis, our County Manager, General Managers, and department heads held daily communications to share updates on operations and challenges that emerged as Durham County responded to the **twin challenges** that resulted from addressing a **cyber malware attack** and **the Coronavirus pandemic**.

That's right...while most other governments were battling the significant effects of COVID, we had a double whammy with the cyber attack causing everyone to work twice as hard to manage.

The Emergency Operations Center staff conducted daily virtual meetings with key leaders of City and County Government to address challenges and stay on top of trends as the cases began to escalate.

Various task forces were created using Durham County employees to plan and respond to critical needs including food delivery to the most vulnerable and sheltering the homeless in safer conditions.

The EOC team coordinated the COVID-19 operational planning and response. A few major priorities included:

- Making Alert Durham available for Public Health's use for the duration of the event to send out COVID-19 messaging
- Contract negotiations to secure hotels rooms for use as non-congregate shelters for vulnerable citizens living unsheltered.
- Coordinating volunteer and donations management and handing-off that support to the Salvation Army
- Coordinating DSS, EMS Community Paramedics, and Public Health for individual and family wellness checks
- Securing PPE and distributing masks, gloves, face shields.

Our employees began **teleworking** as county departments were still operating, but generally scaled back for months.

Thankfully our departments had developed Continuity of Operations plans, and with a few updates and pivots, major Durham County services continued to be available to the community.

With the physical closing of county buildings, departments worked dynamically to provide services online where possible, and as needed, in person services with the overall goal of protecting staff and citizens alike. Here are some examples:

**Register of Deeds** announced reduced services, initially also due to the malware cyber-attack. As technology was restored, online records became available, and appointments were offered.

**Social Services** operated with limited staff onsite by rotating its staff. Mandated and Core services were provided including Medicaid enrollment, Food Stamp enrollment, Child protective services, and more.

**Tax Administration** adapted its remote call center and implemented a live chat feature on the Tax website to respond to COVID. As a result, the department received a National Association of Counties Achievement Award for the feature that lessened call wait times.

**Durham County Public Health** developed a rigorous public information response that included the creation of a dedicated website for Coronavirus information available in English and Spanish. Public Health Director Rod Jenkins began to tape weekly videos to inform the public on current trends and critical information. They were posted on social media and Durham Television Network 8.

Durham County has critical functions that operate on a 24/7 basis such as Durham County Youth Home, Office of the Sheriff, Durham County wastewater treatment plant, Emergency Medical Services and more.

These operations, along with agencies that must support them such as General Services, maintained all normal operations despite the pandemic. In many cases the workload increased due to the demand for additional services to ensure safety of buildings against COVID. Additional cleaning services were engaged to help comply with CDC requirements.

Durham County Public Information staff moved into action to continuously develop and place relevant service updates on the County's website and social media.

The Durham County TV show shifted resources and reassigned them allowing department heads to tape timely/weekly video updates describing the current state of their operations.

Those videos were placed on social media and Durham County's YouTube Channel.

I will end this section here and pick up the rest of the period in my next report. Stay safe and be well, and I will see you for part two of the State of the County.

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