



Durham County 2021

State of the County Address

Video Part 2

Delivered by Chair Brenda Howerton

October 2021

Hello, I am Brenda Howerton, Chair of the Durham County Board of Commissioners. It is my pleasure to bring you our second installment of the State of the County. In our first episode, I focused on the extraordinary work our employees performed in planning for, identifying and addressing the pandemic. We confronted the ever-changing challenges that emerged with the goal of protecting the lives of our citizens.

In this report, I will share our successes and challenges with new and expanded programs and services that we have implemented during the period.

As the pandemic continued, Public Health created a coronavirus data hub to give real time updates on the numbers of cases, hospitalizations, recoveries, deaths, related demographics, geographic information, and other key metrics about the cases.

As Governor Cooper put the state under similar closing orders, Durham County's rules were established and were even more strict. The requirement of "Mask Wearing" was implemented here earlier than in other areas, which resulted in Durham County's lower rate of cases.

While our nation was battling the pandemic, a presidential election was also being held. That gave Elections officials perhaps the greatest challenge ever experienced.... how to conduct a safe election during a COVID-19 pandemic.

Our Elections Department developed safety protocols for staff and our voters. Educational videos were created in English and Spanish to help voters know how to safely cast ballots. Thanks to excellent leadership by the board of elections, a record number of voters participated in the 2020 Elections, either by mail or in person. With the high number of voters, 2020 was referred to as an "historic" general election.

During the 2020 Election, Nida Allam and Nimasheena Burns were elected as new Durham County Commissioners. They joined our historic, now all female Board of Commissioners.

Our community said goodbye to two County Commissioners in November: Former Chair Ellen Reckhow, who served for a record setting 32 years, and Commissioner James Hill, who served a four-year term.

A much-needed bright spot in the battle against COVID happened when vaccines were given emergency FDA approval. Durham County began giving vaccines on December 22, 2020. Pfizer, Moderna and Johnson and Johnson were "music in the ears" of everyone hoping to put COVID behind us and start the recovery in 2021.

As local governments continued to grapple with the tasks that presented themselves, the federal government sent much needed dollars into communities to help individual families, along with state and local governments.

Our federal government passed the CARES Act, which included payments to state and local governments to assist with costs of COVID.

Durham County received funds to help offset mounting costs of providing various services that had not been anticipated.

Many families and individuals received stimulus checks that provided **fast and direct** economic assistance. Small businesses and industries also received federal funds to help maintain employees and operations.

Durham County, the City of Durham and Duke University created The **Small Business Recovery Fund**. This \$3 million dollar program was managed by the Carolina Small Business Development Fund as they had the infrastructure to ensure the program's success. Over 175 small, minority, and women-owned local businesses were helped in their fight for survival.

Durham County's success in attracting new companies, and expanding existing ones continued. A few major companies that announced new and expanding efforts in Durham County included:

- Smart Wires, bringing its corporate headquarters and investing \$21.5 million dollars
- Beam Therapeutic, which brought an \$83 million dollar deal
- Eli Lilly and Company which announced a \$474 Million dollar deal
- And Google, which will eventually bring 1,000 jobs to the area.

As we normally do, our Board of Commissioners held a budget retreat, giving direction to staff for the process. Some of our priorities included:

1. Providing funds to address the broad needs resulting from COVID
2. Providing Tax relief to low-income citizens
3. Job Creation and Workforce Development
4. Reducing Black Maternal and Infant mortality
5. Supporting back to work efforts post pandemic
6. Supporting an increase in Mental Health Services
7. Improving prosperity for all through Education

After months of management and budget staff work and Board deliberations, we unanimously approved a **\$736 Million dollar budget**, which included a one cent tax increase. Our rate to 72.22 cents per \$100

dollars of valuation. I'm proud to say our Board made important strategic investments in this budget. Let me share a few highlights.

With education a continuing priority, we provided more than **\$166 million dollars** in funding for Durham Public Schools.

In support of another long-term educational Board priority, Pre-K expansion increased slightly over **\$250,000**. The budget allotment for Pre-K expansion now totals **\$5.62 million dollars** for the coming year.

This budget also includes **\$942,000** to support the new **Long-Term Homeowner Grant Program** for residents at or below 30% of the area median income. Grants are to be awarded to qualifying recipient's primary residence to help reduce the amount of property taxes due.

Supporting **workforce development and job creation**, our budget has **\$906,000** to support Durham Technical Community College's workforce pipeline initiative and operations. In 2020, we approved \$60,000 hoping it would leverage **\$240,000** in grants through the U.S. Economic Development Administration's (EDA) Economic Adjustment Assistance program. Durham Tech recently received that money, and now will expand the school's biotechnology course offerings and bring the County its first aseptic training program.

We provided a **3% Cost of Living Adjustment** for all employees and brought back merit pay increases based on performance. Last year's budget froze employee increases. By doing this, we tried to honor the incredible work performed by essential personnel during the previous year's pandemic.

This budget also funded 60 total new positions across multiple County departments to support increased work demands.

Durham County hired its first Food Security Coordinator, **Mary Oxendine** who will support the community to create a strong and equitable food system for residents to find affordable and healthy food.

Several new initiatives with the City of Durham began to take shape during this period.

The 17-member **Durham City-County Racial Equity Commission** was created to advocate for policies that will help eliminate the burden of systemic, and institutional inequities and racism in Durham County.

The **Durham Community Safety & Wellness Task Force** was formed by the Durham County, the City of Durham, and Durham Public Schools Board to conduct a comprehensive review of existing institutional and community-based public safety and wellness resources, and to make recommendations for improvements.

Through an Interlocal agreement, we have also joined the City to hire a **Refugee and Immigrant Affairs Coordinator** who will work to build relationships and partnerships with organizations that serve the immigrant community.

Ensuring that our elderly residents age gracefully is a Board Priority. The **Durham Master Aging Plan Committee** and its 5 working groups are examining the areas of: Civic Participation, Transportation, Housing, Community Support & Health Services and more.

Protecting our **LGBTQ community** from discrimination is critical, and our Board of Commissioners will soon bring forward a nondiscrimination ordinance that protects LGBTQ residents from discrimination in many areas of life.

As I begin to wrap up, I must take a moment to say that we have amazingly talented employees at Durham County Government. Even in a pandemic, our staff continued to gain national awards for their innovative work.

Several of our Durham County Departments received NACo Achievement Awards for their visionary work.

NACo recognized our Durham County Tax Administration for its multi-faceted COVID-19 Response. Tax adapted its remote call center and implemented a live chat feature on its website.

NACo recognized our Board of Elections for its Board of Elections Poll Count Application which helped reduce the number of Election Day calls to the Board of Elections regarding precinct opening and unofficial counts.

NACo recognized Public Health for its COVID-19 Vaccine Distribution Dashboard. Public Health, Office of Emergency Services, and Information Services and Technology collaborated to develop the COVID-19 Vaccine Distribution Dashboard.

The Strategic Planning and Innovation Division of the County Manager's Office received a 2021 Excellence in Innovation Award from the North Carolina Association of County Commissioners for its DCo Talks: Employee virtual learning sessions.

We are so proud of this great work by our employees.

In my final segment, I will talk about efforts now in the works to assist our recovery.... with the help of \$62 million dollars in federal funding and more that will be coming into our community to help in major areas.

Thank you for your attention, and don't miss our final State of the County message.

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