

**State of the County**  
**Chair Brenda Howerton**  
**April 11, 2022**

Good evening and welcome to our annual State of the County Address. I am delighted that we can gather, in person, right here in our Chambers to share in this occasion! This is indeed a special time, because we are sharing this message during our National County Government Month.

As you know, our Durham County Board of Commissioners is a history making Board! For the first time in our state's history, this Durham Board of Commissioners is comprised of all women. I'd like you to join me honoring my esteemed colleagues.

Please stand as I call your names:

Wendy Jacobs, Vice Chair.

Heidi Carter.

Nimasheena Burns.

Nida Allam.

Thank you so much for your service! Certainly, we all are honored to serve our community.... and **we appreciate your support.**

As your Board of County Commissioners, our role is to provide direction to our professional staff who ensure that we address

the day to day needs of our diverse, and ever-growing community.

I want to now introduce our brand-new county manager, Dr. Kimberly Sowell. Less than a month ago, she was sworn in during our County Commissioners Meeting. Dr. Sowell is our 8<sup>th</sup> Durham County Manager and is the first Female Manager to hold this position. We continue to make history!

I must say that she has indeed hit the ground running. In her first week with us, she held a ZOOM session to introduce herself to our workforce. During that time, she addressed employees' questions as they were posed. Manager Sowell also shared her 90-day plan, which includes meeting with as many of our employees as possible, and reaching out to our community partners, stakeholders and elected officials. Thank you, Dr. Sowell, for accepting our appointment and again welcome to Durham County!

I would like to also acknowledge our General Managers who support the County Manager. Deborah Craig-Ray, Joanne Pierce, Gudrun Parmer, Jay Gibson, Peri Manns and Claudia Hager.

I want to especially say a special thank you to General Manager Claudia Hager, who served as our interim County Manager and kept us on track. Thank you for your service, General Manager Hager.

Rounding out our leadership team is our Acting County Attorney Willie Darby, Clerk to the Board Monica Wallace and our Tax Administrator Dwane Brinson. Thank you all for your outstanding service to the Durham County community, particularly during these stressful times.

To all our Department Heads and employees of Durham County joining us here, and at home, I say “Thank you” for your great work! Through these times, all of you have shown resilience, tenacity, and perseverance!

You represent a wonderful group of talented, compassionate public servants who have worked tirelessly, especially during these pandemic years, to serve our residents. You joined with our community partners to help manage life during a most difficult, challenging, and extraordinary period.

As challenging as it was working in a pandemic, just trying to manage from day to day, so many of our extraordinary employees also found time and energy and compassion to volunteer throughout the community, to help anywhere they were needed.

You helped our senior citizens, our families who needed meals, you provided critical information about resources and services, you helped with vaccination efforts in the community, and so much more. And we are so grateful to each one of you.

Certainly, the COVID pandemic has touched us all since early 2020. But many of you watching this evening may not know that just before the pandemic, our government was hit with a massive cyber-attack that impacted nearly all of Durham County's services.

I want to thank our teams who sprang into action and worked to ensure that our operations continued. Our success was led by the Office of Emergency Services, and our IS&T staff who worked for weeks rebuilding and restoring our service.

Essentially, Durham County experienced a double hit. First, we had a **cyber-attack**, then we had the declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Office of Emergency Services and Durham County Public Health worked to help our organization and the greater community understand what we were dealing with.

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

I must say that during these two years, we have learned a great deal about the **resilience** of our employees at Durham County Government. Indeed, every department worked out alternate plans to provide services to our residents to the greatest extent possible.

We learned that some county operations could function in a remote environment, and they did. But at the end of the day, much of our workforce still had to provide services each day, despite the pandemic. The Office of the Sheriff, General Services, Emergency Medical Services, Youth Home employees, Engineering and more.

I want to share a **special thanks** to our employees who were present as normal and did their jobs day in and day out. We are so grateful for your dedication and your tenacity in this time.

As the pandemic wore on, and as we learned how to keep ourselves safe, more services reopened. One example I want to highlight is our Library system. Over time, employees developed a process to serve its patrons safely. And thankfully last July, we were able to gather in person for the official opening of our transformed Main Library. A great day indeed!

Durham County worked to address the holistic needs of the community during COVID. We shared regular weekly COVID messages in English and Spanish about methods to keep safe. Public Health Director Rod Jenkins taped weekly videos to inform the public on current trends and critical information. We all remember the **three W's: Wear a mask, Wait six feet, and Wash your hands.**

Durham formed various task forces and working groups across the community to address food insecurity among our most vulnerable citizens. We distributed masks and gloves with local nonprofits. We worked to provide temporary shelter to many homeless residents. Thanks so much to all **our residents and**

**business leaders** who joined with Durham County to help us get through this difficult time.

But the **real game changer** came in December 2020 with the FDA approval of COVID VACCINES! 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.

Durham County Public Health began distributing vaccines, first for our seniors who had been most impacted by COVID, and eventually to other age groups as directed by the CDC. Yes, we eventually were able to vaccinate our 5–11-year-olds. I certainly have hopes that we are very close to being able to provide vaccines to our 4-year old’s and under children.

As we continue to move forward from the past two years, one might say we are beginning a post pandemic period on many fronts. Just a few weeks ago Governor Cooper said he believed the worst of the pandemic was over. He continued to add two important notes.

First, he said, “**as we enter the next phase of individual responsibility, preparedness and prosperity, it’s time to chart a new course.**” Basically, he was saying that after two years of emergency orders and mandates, now is the time for all of us to manage our own health and safety by ensuring we are

following public health rules, and if we are not vaccinated, to obtain the vaccine.

The Governor also stressed the positive financial position the state is in overall and noted that the state's economy has recovered to **pre-COVID employment levels**. Durham County fortunately is one area of the state that has indeed weathered the economic storm with record numbers of new industries and jobs emerging.

Durham County's success in attracting new companies, and expanding existing ones continued during the past two years. Some companies that announced new and expanded efforts in Durham County included:

- **Smart Wires**, bringing its corporate headquarters and investing \$21.5 million dollars and creating 250 jobs
- **Beam Therapeutic**, which brought an \$83 million dollar deal
- **Eli Lilly and Company** which announced a \$474 Million dollar deal
- And **Google Cloud Hub**, which will eventually bring 1,000 jobs to the area.

We continue to marvel at the great work and results that have come our way, and interest in Durham County continues. We continue to be seen as a leader in biopharma, life sciences, innovation and more.

Certainly, Durham County remains in a positive financial condition even during a pandemic. You may remember that we received news of various Federal appropriations to help with the pandemic. First, there was the passage of the CARES Act, a **\$2 Trillion-dollar** economic stimulus bill designed to help address the early costs of the pandemic.

Then in March 2021, the **American Rescue Plan Act** was passed. This **\$1.9 Trillion dollar** package continued to provide funding to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. This legislation provided **\$362 billion** in federal fiscal recovery aid for state and local governments.

Durham County was awarded **\$62 million dollars** over two years to support transformative projects, thanks to the American Rescue Plan Act. We have and are continuing to make final decisions about how this funding will provide the most impact in our community. If you didn't know, these funds must be used for specific areas:

- Support Public Health Response
- Address negative Economic impact caused by COVID
- Replace Public Sector Revenue Loss
- Premium Pay for Essential workers
- Water, Sewer, Infrastructure
- Broadband Infrastructure

Just a week or so ago, we held a Community Engagement Event on the **American Rescue Plan Act and Broadband**, at the Northern Durham Campus of Durham Tech. We heard directly from our residents about the lack of broadband in certain areas



of Durham. Our staff explained that providing Broadband has been an ongoing priority with our Board, and the infusion of funds provided the chance to move this project forward.

It was also noted that the pandemic really highlighted the need for expanding broadband in every community for several key reasons including:

- Solving the Digital Divide
- Improving Education and addressing learning loss
- Enhancing the economy
- And supporting increased availability of Telehealth Medicine and patient education.

During the meeting, staff and residents also discussed strategies and ideas about how we will use **American Rescue Plan Act** funds to improve broadband availability in certain areas of Durham County.

Just to share more about plans to our use **American Rescue Plan Act** funds, we have held virtual meetings to explain the uses of the funds over the past months. Our staff has asked the community to submit proposals to effectively use these funds. Many proposals have been received and will be reviewed by our staff.

Once proposals are vetted, recommended projects will come forward to our Board of Commissioners for approval and implementation. Moving forward, staff will evaluate the impact of investments and make recommendations for how to spend remaining federal dollars.

There is a specific timeline in effect. Funds must be incurred and obligated by **December 31, 2024**. Funds must be expended to cover obligations, and all work must be completed by **December 31, 2026**. I encourage you to follow this process as it continues to unfold.

Of course, approving a County Budget is a major responsibility of our Board, and we have an outstanding budget team to manage that annual process. We approved the current budget of **\$736 Million dollars** and made important strategic investments in this budget.

Our Board provided more than **\$166 million dollars** in funding for Durham Public Schools, continuing our priority in educational support. We continued investing in Pre-K, providing **\$5.62 million dollars** for this current year.

The budget also included **\$942,000** to support the new **Long-Term Homeowner Grant Program** for residents at, or below 30% of the area median income.

A **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 the Durham Public Schools Board to conduct a comprehensive review of existing institutional and community-based public safety and wellness resources.

The Budget included hiring a **Refugee and Immigrant Affairs Strategist** to build relationships and partnerships with organizations that serve the immigrant community.

The **Durham Master Aging Plan Committee continued its working groups to address the quality of life for our seniors.**

Our Board approved a **nondiscrimination ordinance** to protect LGBTQIA+ residents from discrimination in many areas of life.

As a part of the current budget, we were fortunate to use **\$5.1M** of American Rescue Plan Act dollars to help support various important COVID needs such as:

- Janitorial contracts for COVID -19 to clean county buildings using COVID standards
- Added Security services due to COVID-19
- COVID Screening in high traffic areas
- Non congregate housing support
- School Health Nurses
- Minority Business Infrastructure Supports

Our Board met in February to begin to work on this year's budget priorities. We heard important information about the current economic climate from our Budget and Finance staff, our Tax Administration, and our Financial Advisor.

As I noted earlier, Durham County is in very good financial shape, but we must remain good stewards of those dollars as we move forth.

During that Budget planning session, our Commissioners discussed critical community priorities and initiatives that are to be considered in developing this year's budget. Those priorities included:

- Continue the Tax Assistance Grant Program
- Adopt the Capital Improvement Plan
- Expand funding to support crime reduction and intervention initiatives
- Increase funding that supports children and families
- Increase funding to support mental health and behavioral health services
- Expand funding that supports Black Maternal Health
- Expand transit investments
- Implement Broadband to our rural areas.
- Expand universal access to high quality Pre-K
- Allocate **American Rescue Plan Act** funds to support transformative community investments

While this list is not all our priorities, I feel it represents our current goals moving forward. I urge you to follow our Budget process as it unfolds this spring. There are at least two key dates that you should remember at this time.

Our new County Manager will formally present her **Recommended Budget for Fiscal Year 22-23 on May 9<sup>th</sup>**.

The second date to remember is that the **Public Hearing for the Budget will be held by our Board on May 23<sup>rd</sup>**. Remember this is your time to be heard about what is important in your community.

As we move forward in our recovery, I want to mention a few priorities that are important to our entire community. I must say that it is my pleasure to join with our New Mayor Elaine O'Neal on some very critical programs to improve the lives of everyone in this community.

Workforce Development is a priority of this Board. Youth aged 14-24 are ready to participate in Durham's YouthWorks program. The need for job training is great, and the youth of Durham are eager to step up to meet the challenge!

Durham Tech offers a more robust essential work-readiness skill building component, extending this skills training from **4 days to 2 weeks**. After that, students select their area of interest for in-depth career exploration, and are paired with industry professionals through career panels, small group conversations, and mentoring. This year's program looks to build off last year's success! How exciting!

While the pandemic brought challenges, it has also unleashed a newfound sense of **collaboration, and innovation** among community partners with shared goals. Efforts around workforce development are a great example of such teamwork.

Local governments, institutional partners, and community organizations have joined together to better connect residents to fantastic career opportunities, and employers to the local workforce. Efforts have included virtual job fairs, enhanced employment resources, and industry-specific recruitment and training programs.

Some of the specific industry focus includes hospitality, skills trades, and life sciences. A great illustration of such programming is the Building Up Local Life Sciences **or** (BULLS) initiative that provides success coaches, wrap-around support services, and scholarships for students earning their certificate in biopharma manufacturing at Durham Tech.

While the program is currently focused on life sciences, we believe that this model can be scaled to other high-demand industry certificates to help **Durham Build Up Local Labor Systems!**

Another priority is Transportation, and how we need to proceed with great collaborative planning. Our Board of Commissioners continues to work with our staff and transportation partners on advancing the Transit Plan Governance Study. This will provide a new, more transparent governance process, and an Inter-Local Agreement to deliver better stewardship and oversight of our critical county transportation funds.

This Governance study, coupled with our ongoing work on the Durham Transportation Plan following a robust comprehensive, community engagement effort, will help ensure that **all voices are heard** with respect to transportation priorities. And will help ensure that we utilize our County-provided transportation funds in the most efficient, effective way for our residents and the region.

Earlier this year, we resurrected the former Crime Cabinet. This New Crime Cabinet brings to the table, people with a lived experience who are closest to the pain of crime, together with

decision makers. The goal is to develop new ideas that can be implemented to significantly reduce the impact of violent crime that is hurting our community. We have had two meetings thus far.

Mayor O'Neal has called on citizens to volunteer up to five hours a week to help our community, particularly in those areas experiencing high unemployment, violent crime, and other needs. I'm happy to say that Durham County supports our employee volunteer involvement in the community.

Each month, four hours of paid leave is available for employees to volunteer their service to organizations that align with our strategic goals. Durham Public Schools, Habitat for Humanity, Meals on Wheels, Big Brothers, Big Sisters, The Food Bank of Central & Eastern North Carolina and many more, count our employees as volunteers.

Durham County has a long-standing relationship with the Triangle Nonprofit and Volunteer Leadership Center. This organization helps connect our employees with more than 23,000 volunteer agencies across the Triangle.

I encourage our community members to join the effort to volunteer in our neighborhoods that really need caring, compassionate individuals willing to lend assistance. Sign up with one of the organizations, and start making a difference today.

Durham's quality of life is unparalleled. We continue to receive accolades from the national media. Here are just a few recent accolades:

- Durham is No. 25 in the top 100 best places to live in America by Livability
- Durham is number 29 among Most diverse cities in America by Niche
- Durham is number #66 of Best Cities for Young Professionals by Niche, and the list goes on.

**In closing, let me say.... despite any challenges that will emerge,** I know that we have the best and brightest team of employees in place to keep us moving in the right direction. Durham County is a community that values diversity of thought and collaboration.

We have **amazing employees.** We have **talented and innovative management,** and we have **outstanding county commissioners.**

I have great faith in Durham County Government and its capabilities. With that, I am confident that **Durham County will continue to be a leader among local government for years to come.**

**Thank you!**

END