

2017 Greater Durham Chamber of Commerce Mayoral Candidate Questionnaire

Candidate's Full Name

Pierce Freelon

Your current occupation

Professor and Founder of Blackspace

Have you held an elected position before? If so, please describe.

No

Have you ever served on a public board or commission? If so, please state the name of the board and the dates that you served.

I am the youngest person in the history of the state to be appointed by the Governor to serve on the Board of the North Carolina Arts Council (2010 - 2013)

I have also served on the following boards:

2012 - 2015 / Board member, Sacrificial Poets (Durham, NC)

2012 - 2015 / Board member, Nasher Museum of Art (Durham, NC)

2011 - 2016 / Board member, KidzNotes (Durham, NC)

2011 - 2015 / Board member, Durham Library Foundation (Durham, NC)

Have you received endorsements from the Durham Committee on the Affairs of Black People, Friends of Durham, People's Alliance, or any other notable organization? If so, please indicate which ones.

I have been endorsed by:

Equality NC

Run For Something

The Collective PAC

Launch Progress PAC

1. What do you believe to be the most important job of our Mayor?

The most important job of the Mayor is to provide visionary leadership. In Durham, the Mayor is just one member of a seven-person council. They set the agenda, priorities and tone for the city manager and various departments. It is important for the Mayor, and their fellow council members to have a strategic vision, which reflects the will of the community. An effective leader should be able to communicate, have integrity, be transparent, have bold vision and be accountable to the people.

2. Why have you decided to run for Mayor in the City of Durham?

My grandmother used to say, "if you do what you've always done, you get what you've always got."

Under the watch of our current city council, billions of development dollars have poured into downtown Durham. Yet, poverty is up, the income inequality gap is the highest in our state, crime is

up, cost of living is up, 40% of black and brown children live in poverty, and over 800 people are evicted every month. If these issues have risen under the watch of city council members, why should we expect a different course with a current city council member leading our city? I'm running for Mayor because a new, bold and progressive voice is needed in the chorus of City Council. We need fresh perspectives to the challenges and opportunities facing our city. I will embrace the uniqueness and diversity of our **community**, ensure everyone benefits from the city's **growth**, and invest in the future of our **youth**.

3. Please define the constituency for our Mayor.

The Mayor's constituency includes the entire city; entrepreneurs, the homeless, students, city employees, developers and artists; the LGBTQ, straight, black, white and Latinx community; children, millennials, GenXers, and Boomers. Our community is very diverse and the Mayor needs to represent all Durhamites.

4. Please define the role you believe corporations and businesses should play within the City of Durham.

Corporations and businesses play a vital role in the growth, economic development, quality of life and the diversity, character and culture of Durham. Durham was once home to a booming tobacco industry, which we've transformed into an innovative hub for tech, health, education and culture. Businesses and corporations have played an instrumental role in our evolution, which has made Durham one of the most attractive, and quickly growing cities in the world. We believe businesses and corporations can play an important role in supporting Durham residents by paying their employees a living wage. This will allow members of our community to afford a warm place to live, food to eat, education and a pathway out of generational poverty. I look forward to working closely with local businesses and corporations to make these basic human rights more available throughout Durham.

5. Do you support public-private partnerships through incentive opportunities for incubating and recruiting businesses? Please explain your answer.

City leaders have a responsibility to measure the benefits of economic development initiatives against their costs. Starting in 2017, the Government Accounting Standards Board required a report of costs of corporate subsidy "tax abatements" be made available to the public. We must go further than this to ensure that transparent decisions are made with meaningful public input and that incentives and subsidies are disbursed only after performance standards are met. We also need to enact clawbacks to hold partners accountable to what they say they're going to do in a timely manner.

According to Good Jobs First Subsidy tracker, Durham provided nearly \$25 million in tax incentives between 2012 and 2015. We need to make sure that we can measure the benefits of this investment and make informed decisions accordingly, so that we get the

most bang for our buck! What we are looking for, essentially, is a win-win scenario. Mutually beneficial partnerships bind incentives to community benefits agreements. This guarantees Durhamites get tangible deliverables for their investments.

Since 2013, the Economic Development Department in Austin, Texas, has used performance-based incentives and required businesses to demonstrate public benefit when they apply for public subsidies. “The department uses a transparent scoring system based on 11 criteria—ranging from jobs created to contracting opportunities—to weigh the costs and benefits of providing a business with public funding. Companies receiving public subsidies are also required to integrate diversity and inclusion targets in their business plans. The city posts the details of all its economic development agreements online for the public to review.” We could expand on this by adding a racial and gender equity assessment criteria.

6. In 2011, the Greater Durham Chamber of Commerce led a sales tax referendum for multimodal transportation. Given recent updates, do you believe the transit plan still makes sense for Durham in 2017-2019? Also, do you believe this plan supports current and future growth patterns? Please explain your answers.

Multi-modal transportation is important for the future of our city. We need to prepare for a future where folks can bike, walk, skateboard, segue, light rail or drive (or, eventually *be driven* by the cars themselves) around Durham. We need to prepare for this future now. Regarding transit, I support Durham’s Light Rail Project. I have some serious reservations about the following: 1) rising costs, 2) the state reducing its commitment from 25% to 10%, 3) the fact that we weren’t able to get buy-in from Raleigh, and 4) I would have liked to have seen more stops in East Durham, servicing low-income communities, but at this point it seems like the proverbial train already left the station.

In the interim, I would advocate that we continue to invest dollars in expanding our public transportation services—free buses, accessible sidewalks, revamping infrastructure, upgrading the bus station, enhancing rapid transit, and building more bike lanes. This is particularly important now, as the Bull City Connector’s future is increasingly uncertain. Folks who rely on public transportation need relief now, and can’t wait until the rail is finished in a decade.

7. Do you support tax or other fee increases to augment revenue growth? Do you feel the private sector should pay a greater cost burden? Please state why or why not.

Taxes are important to pay for the services our growing city demands. I believe that those who are able to absorb a greater cost burden should do so. The private sector has helped growth,

but has also played a role in displacing folks, and should play a role in addressing their impact on the surrounding community.

8. Please state the top three infrastructure challenges confronting the City of Durham. If elected, how do you plan to help resolve these challenges?

Three infrastructure problems include: 1. lack of sidewalks and safe green spaces, especially in low-income neighborhoods. 2. crumbling public housing stock. 3. Roads, potholes.

I would help resolve this problem with Jobs For All. We are proposing a Jobs Guarantee, where unemployed Durham residents would be trained for living-wage jobs, including in infrastructure. This serves the dual issues of reducing poverty by giving unemployed folks training and jobs, while investing in making our community run more efficiently, by addressing our infrastructure shortfalls.

9. What should the City's priorities be in working with other stakeholders to develop and preserve affordable housing?

The city dedicates only \$9 million for affordable housing through the city's Dedicated Housing Fund. I applaud the recent increase, going from 1 cent to 2 cents for every dollar of property tax. This is projected to create, preserve, or repair 1,150 affordable housing units every year. But, it does not go far enough. This 2 cent increase costs the average Durhamite \$37 per average household per year to help sustain affordable housing in Durham. If we were to double that, to 4 cents, or a nickel, we could provide housing for thousands of local residents for a fraction of the price of a Durham Bulls season ticket (or less than half the cost of a ticket to Moogfest) per average household.

By comparison, the city is currently using the entirely discretionary General Revenue Fund to spend \$60 million annually on the budget for our Durham Police Department, in addition to the \$71 million price tag for the new headquarters. In terms of funding for these initiatives, we should look at equitable allocation of existing taxpayer dollars. An analysis of the intersecting layers of oppression reveals that homelessness and unemployment are a threat to public safety. There's a housing crisis when 800 people a month are being evicted, which makes it difficult to find a home, desperation and a lack of resources make our streets less safe. We can alleviate some of these problems by providing for the most vulnerable. We could provide city money to fund legal help for people facing eviction, like Philadelphia and New York City have recently done.

But the city can't do it alone. We must work with private industry to provide affordable housing solutions. We must leverage public-private partnerships, networks, and

resources, and partner with 501(c)(3)s, such as Habitat for Humanity, to make this a joint effort.

Durham should be committed to using all necessary tools, while also ensuring opportunities for the future. One type of tool is a tiny house initiative that will not just provide affordable homes but also create pathways for homeownership and job training. There are even some models for tech-savvy smart tiny homes, which can be built vertically. We need to be creative and relentless to deal with this problem. Examples of existing models include the work of Durham Habitat for Humanity, and initiatives recently launched in Greensboro and Detroit.

10. What additional business issue confronting the City of Durham in 2017-2019 do you believe to be the most important? Please explain your answer.

The City of Durham is a powerful economic engine, with an annual budget of nearly \$430 million, thousands of employees and contractors, and influence over local companies and institutions. Yet Durham has become a city of haves and have nots - 25% of black and latinx residents and 29% of Durham's children live in poverty. Underemployment and unemployment are persistent problems, especially for groups who are subject to discriminatory exclusion from employment opportunities. The extent of inequality is tremendous: black and latinx families are three times more likely to live in poverty than their white counterparts. Poverty and the innumerable negative personal, social, and economic outcomes associated with it are a drain on the City of Durham's budget, its communities, and its economy, and most importantly its people.

One solution is to launch a city-wide jobs guarantee program. I am working with one of the country's leading economists on a Jobs For All program for Durham. Through Jobs for All, Durham can invest in its people and encourage other employers to do the same. This jobs guarantee program will provide good jobs with good benefits and wages for anyone who wants to work and cannot find work.

Hands down, I believe the biggest business issue is poverty. Until we address this issue, our growth will be neither sustainable, nor equitable.

Signature: 

Date: 9/20/17