



Third Annual State of the County Address

**Michael D. Page, Chairman
Durham Board of County Commissioners
March 12, 2009**

Good Evening. Fellow Commissioners, County Manager Ruffin, Durham County staff, special guests, my fellow citizens, those who are in the chambers and those who may be watching us on television or on the internet. I have the distinct honor of presenting my first annual State of the Durham County Address. I am humbled to stand before you today, having been selected by my fellow commissioners to Chair our Board just this past December 1st. I appreciate the confidence you have placed in me to lead this Board and our community forward.

Thank you to predecessor and Board

Before I begin my brief remarks, I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge the outstanding leadership of my predecessor Ellen W. Reckhow, who ably presided over this body as chairman for the past six years. Thank you Ellen for your great leadership and know that we are a greater community because of your tireless efforts.

To my fellow board members, Commissioner Reckhow, Commissioner Bowser, Commissioner Heron and Commissioner Howerton, our citizens have elected us to work on their behalf. I am confident that we will forge a productive and positive working relationship and mutually pursue policies that are in the best interest of our entire community. Thank you in advance for your efforts and willingness to work with me to service the citizens of Durham.

State of the County Address Summary

I plan to take just a few moments this evening reflecting on our remarkable achievements over the past year. But it is also critical that you hear some of the unprecedented challenges that face us in our current economic climate and how our new Board will address county priorities going forward.

As this community has seen in the past, Durham County continues to be well managed financially and our employees are creative and productive. Permit me to touch on a few significant achievements.

Financial Vitality

Our Durham County Tax Office had another banner year in terms of collections and increased customer service opportunities.

Durham County achieved a record setting tax collection rate of 98.87% giving us the second highest collections rate among the state's 10 largest counties.

The Tax office also made significant upgrades in the area of customer service by adding a new Tax Kiosk at Northgate Mall that accepts cash, credit and debit payments. This kiosk, the first of its kind in North Carolina, offers residents a convenient method to pay taxes and renew motor vehicle registration. A second kiosk is also located downstairs in the tax office.

Earlier in 2008 just before the economic downturn, Durham County helped to facilitate a \$300 million expansion of the Merck Pharmaceutical plant in northern Durham County, as well as a new \$363 million IBM Data Services facility. Our Board approved \$750,000 in economic incentives for the data center. In the fall, Greenfire Development received the support of our Board for a public private partnership to support a parking facility to go near the planned Justice Center to help spur downtown development.

As our County builds and expands, I am grateful for organizations like the Chamber of Commerce, Durham Technical Community College and the Workforce Development Board that have made it possible for jobs and businesses to come to the Durham area. The Brownfields Initiative is one of many examples that have opened up job opportunities for our citizens. It is my hope that the stimulus package, signed President Barack Obama, will yield funding that will provide greater job opportunities in this area.

Health and Human Services

To further develop the area of Health and Human Services for Durham's citizens, Durham County invested many resources and started new programs during 2008 to enhance health and safety in our community. We authorized funding of Project Access, a joint initiative with Duke Health Systems, the Durham Orange Medical Society and Durham County to help uninsured Lincoln Community Health Center patients access much needed specialty care free of charge. With the support of the Board of County Commissioners' initial investment of \$488,594, Project Access was launched this past July to help uninsured Lincoln Community Health Center patients gain access to specialty care. A broad network of specialty physicians, including cardiologists, oncologists, along with pharmacists and other health providers' volunteer their time to see patients in need of their services. The good news is that this program is working very well, and low income, uninsured patients are getting help with managing debilitating chronic diseases.

The Durham Center opened a new state-of-the-art, 16-bed healthcare facility in July to provide effective, community based treatment and services for our citizens in crisis. The Durham Center Access facility, located at 309 Crutchfield Street near Durham Regional Hospital, helps residents experiencing a mental health, developmental disability or substance abuse crisis gain access to services to help achieve stabilization, ongoing treatment and support. Patients with an emergency can take advantage of the walk-in crisis emergency unit available 24 hours a day.

Our Durham County Department of Social Services (DSS) received a Ketner Award for the Guardianship Assistance Program by the North Carolina Association of County Commissioners and a Best Practice Award from the NC Association of County Directors of Social Services for the same program.

Capital Improvement Projects

Several major bond projects for Durham Public Schools were completed during the period. The \$8.3 million renovation of Fayetteville Street School was completed with funds from the 2003 bond vote. It includes a new media center, art room, a computer and music room and extensive classroom changes.

Lowes Grove Middle school received \$10 million in extensive renovations including new ceilings, solid wall room dividers, major athletic field upgrades and other site improvements.

The historic Durham School of the Arts received a \$6 million upgrade including a new classroom structure to house two grade levels formerly located in the old Carr building, along with a beautiful new commons area that connects the existing lobby of the Weaver Auditorium and the media center.

The new Spring Valley Elementary School was opened in January to relieve overcrowding at the Oak Grove Elementary school. The school features a natural wooded setting and the structure is LEED certified in keeping with our sustainability goals in Durham County.

Our Library system continued its planned expansion. The Southwest Branch closed for renovations and will be reopened as an expanded full service library 25,000 sq ft. A groundbreaking was held in November for the new South Regional Library which is located diagonally across from Lowe's Grove Middle School.

Progress continues on many other previously approved projects around the county.

Sustainability

Durham County's first energy fair was held for employees and the public featuring displays from local businesses and organizations on how energy can be used. Durham's Sustainability Manager continues to make real progress in implementing initiatives to support our comprehensive plan and to reduce greenhouse gas.

In another initiative, over 1,700 compact florescent light bulbs (CFLs) were distributed to both city and county employees as part of our Energy Pledge drive to help increase awareness of energy reduction beyond the workplace.

Durham County Commissioners also approved increased funding for employee bus passes to help encourage the use of mass transit, in keeping with the Sustainability Plan.

As part of a regional collaborative, Durham County purchased the Hollow Rock access area, a 41 acre tract, from Duke University. More than 105 acres of permanent open space has been protected as part of this project located in Durham and Orange counties. Other partners include the City of Durham, Town of Chapel Hill, Triangle Land Conservancy, Erwin Area Neighborhood Group and the Clean Water Management Trust fund.

Finally, in October 2008, County Commissioners adopted a High Performance Building Policy to mandate that new county buildings be constructed to meet LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certifications.

Thank you to Durham County Employees

While these accomplishments are impressive, I must give credit where credit is due. Durham County employees are to be congratulated for their professionalism, skills and dedication to ensuring the success of programs and services that meet the needs of our residents.

In these tight times, I recognize the critical role our employees play in bringing together the pieces of our government's puzzle. Thank you to our very own Durham County Deputy Sheriffs Leon Wright and Jacob Cash. Earlier this year, the two Deputy Sheriffs helped to save the life of a suicidal man who was distraught over his mother being placed in an assisted living home. By gaining the man's trust, they were able to persuade him to lower the gun, at which point Deputy Sheriff Wright was able to remove the gun. Additionally, Deputy Sheriffs Wright and Cash have been given credit for securing the scene for EMS and Durham Police officers who also were responders to the scene. Thank you Deputy Sheriff Wright. Thank you Deputy Sheriff Cash.

I am also thankful for employees like Eddie Culberson, director of Durham Soil and Water Conservation District. He is another one of our many employees that have exhibited outstanding work and significant contributions to our community. In January 2009, Eddie was named Outstanding Employee of the Year by the North Carolina Association of Soil and Water. Eddie's overall promotion of soil and water conservation in North Carolina causes him to stand out among others in his field. Thank you Eddie for what you do for our community and environment.

Last, but not least, tonight I want to mention great employees like those on our Budget staff. Their commitment to budget excellence allowed them to secure the Distinguished Budget Presentation Award from the Government Finance Officers Association for the fifth consecutive year. This award reflects our budget employees' possession of the highest principles of governmental budgeting.

I am so grateful to our entire employee family for their daily engagement, development of award winning initiatives and, for their energy and enthusiasm in helping our local government to be a leader across this state. To all of our remarkable Durham County employees, I say "Thank you" for what you do on behalf of this organization.

Your expertise helps our organization to operate effectively and efficiently.

Economic Downturn Impacts Durham County Government

As we all know, all levels of government are going through unprecedented economic difficulty as a result of our nation's financial setback. The news is filled with headlines of "decreased revenues" or "growing unemployment" and other terms that were rarely heard just 12 months ago. While I would love to stand here and announce that Durham County has not been impacted by this news, that is simply not the case.

Certainly our community has weathered past downturns because of our strong mix of resilient businesses, but we must acknowledge that our economic engine has stalled. We know that President Obama and Congress are trying to jump start the national economy and we indeed are hopeful that those efforts will have a positive impact. But even the rosier projections look for little improvement over at least the next two years.

In these uncertain times, we will work collaboratively with elected leaders at the federal and state level to ensure that we are taking advantage of funding opportunities for the programs that we are responsible for providing to this community. As the stimulus package is being rolled out, we have already identified programs that may be funded and have assigned a senior administrator the task of coordinating our response to the federal stimulus package so that indeed the right hand knows what the left hand is doing.

County Manager Michael Ruffin, along with his senior managers and department heads have already begun the work to adjust our current budget and to prepare our upcoming budget in light of an ever-changing financial landscape. I have every confidence that they will do their best to recommend to us a responsible spending package that serves the needs of this community and maintains priorities of this Board.

Just a few weeks ago, our new board of commissioners met in a daylong session to begin to draw out our priorities in the face of current economic conditions.

Mission of Durham County Government

I will tell you that our Board remains dedicated to the core mission and responsibilities of Durham County Government.....to enhance the quality of life for its citizens, by providing education, safety and security, health and human services, economic development, cultural and recreational resources. As we worked together to set a course of priorities for this new group of commissioners, several common goals emerged:

Common Goals of BOCC

- We must and will continue to provide quality services while maintaining fiscal responsibility.
- We will maintain a focus on our youth by making investments in quality education, school improvements and programs that prepare them for success.

- We will maintain a focus on economic development by helping recover lost jobs, support job training and pursue relevant partnerships. We will help reduce the poverty rate by promoting financial literacy and home ownership.
- Finally, we will take all steps possible to avoid a tax increase in the next fiscal year.

While we have not concluded all of our work on this Board's priorities, I look forward to our continued dialogue as we work on behalf of our citizens. Over the next few months, you will hear more about our efforts to finalize our goals.

It is my hope that next year during the presentation of the annual State of the County Address, the Board will be able to reflect on how we survived this economic challenge and celebrate a steady recovery filled with a new prosperity.

I have great faith in Durham County Government and its capabilities. It is essential for our Board, employees and citizens to remain connected. Since my chairmanship, I have met with and will continue to work with neighborhood leaders, various community organizations and volunteer associations to maintain open lines of communication. One of the best things we have going on in our community is a wonderful group of organizations engaged in a broad range of community services. Day in, and day out, a network of citizens work as partners to Durham County Government, providing services to our youth, our unemployed, our senior citizens, our financially challenged citizens, our homeless citizens and those in need of health care. These groups collaborate with Durham County Government to broaden services provided throughout the community.

Commissioners Community Circle Award

This evening, I would like to announce a new initiative designed to recognize the work of these organizations. This initiative, the Commissioners Community Circle Award, will highlight community groups and county departments that are going above and beyond to promote positive achievements in our community. The Commissioners Community Circle Award is based on a simple nomination process. At the beginning of Durham County Regular Session meetings, we will highlight the work of a specified group and present their leadership with this award.

With this new initiative one of our goals is to encourage our citizens to participate on boards, commissions and committees that will enhance the overall well being of our community. This initiative will showcase programs that are working well in our community and hopefully encourage others to get involved.

Conclusion

As I conclude, I call upon all citizens to share their ideas with us as we manage this fiscal crisis. If I know anything, it is that no one group has all the answers. Durham County is a community that values diversity of thought and collaboration. It will take the energies of all of us working together to move forward in this environment.

At the end of the day, we must work together to bring the best strategies to bear as we prepare to reshape our government to respond to these economic challenges which are unlike any we have seen for years. I will pledge to you that we will be transparent in our deliberations during these times. It is more important than ever that we are prudent with our county financial resources. Like other governments, we will go through a transition, but I have every confidence that we will emerge a stronger Durham County Government.

Thank you for your time this evening.