

Sunrise Movement Durham 2020 Candidate Questionnaire

Candidate Information

What is the candidate's name?

Heidi Carter

What office is the candidate seeking?

County Commissioner

Is the candidate an incumbent or already serving in another position?

incumbent

In a few sentences, why is the candidate running for this office?

For the past fifteen years, twelve on the Board of Education and three as a County Commissioner, it has been one of my highest honors to serve all of Durham County, and I remain committed to this diverse, complex and dynamic community we love so much. Our County has given much to my family and me, and I want to give back by helping everyone enjoy the wonderful quality of life Durham offers, especially those who are most vulnerable and have been by-passed by Durham's prosperity. During my first term as Commissioner, we made numerous accomplishments and began many promising new initiatives. I cherish the chance to serve again to steer them through to completion.

As we move into a new decade with a swelling population and a growing economy, we need careful planning and thoughtful decision-making to ensure new investments coming to Durham benefit us all. My two topmost guiding principles for decision-making are racial equity and environmental sustainability in three interlocked areas: health, education and economic security.

The Candidate on the Climate Crisis

How do you envision addressing the climate crisis during your time in office?

(Please write a few sentences, or however much you are inspired to write.)

While climate change is a global issue, it has direct impacts on our local environment, and local policy can help fight the climate crisis and develop resilience to it. This is a progressive priority because climate change and pollution have disproportionate negative impacts on our most vulnerable neighbors. Durham can be a leader in sustainability, with less carbon emissions and less pollution. We can shift to renewable energy and restore our local environment to help protect residents from the effects of increased heat, flooding and tropical storms. And we can do so in a way that provides economic opportunities for Durhamites.

The climate crisis will affect so many parts of our lives in the years to come and local government will need to consider sustainability throughout our operations. But I think areas where we can focus and make a difference in the coming years are: renewable energy, transportation, housing and land use, and advocacy.

On renewable energy:

Durham County government adopted a Greenhouse Gas Emissions plan in 2007 with goals to reduce emissions in government by 50% by 2030 and the County adopted a resolution to transition to 80% renewable energy by 2030 and 100% renewable energy by 2050 in County government operations. We are making progress in some areas, including the energy usage of our public buildings and our water management system. But we need to take much more significant action to fulfill those pledges and to make a shift to renewable energy for both County government operations and, more importantly, for our community as a whole.

That action should include investing in community solar energy, including for our public schools, a Solar Schools Initiative that we announced recently, and on our other public buildings. It should include energy efficiency retrofits for our public housing communities and low-income home-owners, along with government buildings. For county operations in particular, we must do much better to reduce emissions from our fleet of vehicles, which has increased over the past decade. One strategy is to begin a “shared fleet” approach where staff members share vehicles rather than having one per person who drives as part of their job.

I have been impressed with the efforts and successes of our Sustainability Office, but as these actions will require major changes throughout government activities, we will need more staff to help in County government and the Durham Public Schools system. We should continue to ask the advice of our Environmental Affairs Board in policy decisions in all areas.

On transportation:

A public engagement process to develop a new County transportation plan has just begun, and I look forward to hearing the community's priorities and suggestions, as well as working with the City's new Transportation Director, who brings expertise from the DC Metro.

With those details still to come, I anticipate a new public transit plan should include the following priorities: frequent and dependable local bus service; a network for active transportation; and, regional transit connections.

Investment in public transit is a win-win-win: we can fight the climate crisis, improve our economy and reduce racial injustice at once. High-frequency buses can replace many solo car trips for commuting, shopping, entertainment and visiting friends and family. A protected network that is friendly, accessible and low-stress can make it easy to walk, bike, roll or ride a scooter: not just on the American Tobacco Trail (which I love), but on existing streets and new trails throughout Durham County. While I strongly supported the light-rail plan for mass transit, we can also make substantial regional connections with commuter rail service through RTP to Raleigh and with bus rapid transit by the Duke, VA and UNC hospitals.

In our budgeting and allocation of public space, we need to consistently prioritize active transportation and public transit over polluting automobile traffic. As a matter of racial equity, reliable bus service is

essential for the current GoDurham ridership who are overwhelmingly people of color, and it provides economic opportunity for those people in Durham who don't have a vehicle. And for environmental sustainability, our urgent shift towards renewable energy and away from carbon emissions requires more shared trips in buses and fewer miles of driving. Plus, public transit and active transportation are more efficient and will make residents safer, happier, wealthier and healthier!

On housing and land use:

Our new Comprehensive Plan is such an opportunity to plan for a new decade of more shared prosperity for Durham County and to integrate climate action into our planning. I look forward to learning more about our community priorities that emerge from the Engage Durham process. Some elements I would like to see include:

- Discouragement of more urban sprawl which decimates our green spaces, increases carbon emissions, puts residents further away from jobs and services, and strains our infrastructure and maintenance budget.
- Fewer parking requirements and less construction of parking garages which drives up the cost of housing, subsidizes wealthier residents and encourages driving: we should prioritize housing for people, not cars.
- More gentle density, like backyard cottages, duplexes, triplexes, townhomes and small apartment buildings. Until the City and County recently adopted amendments that expanded housing options in the urban tier, these types of units have been restricted in the past, even though these homes are present and well-loved in many of our neighborhoods. More options for more compact homes allow for more affordable housing, more vibrant neighborhoods, more community green space and less carbon emissions.

Increased density and transit-oriented development also makes it easier to protect farmland, open spaces and natural corridors in Durham County. I support the efforts of the Farmland Preservation Board to protect farmland and forests, including their work to secure conservation easements on farmland to prohibit its non-agriculture use in the future and open space protection plans. I support enhanced agriculture education in our public schools, and the DPS Hub Farm will help push this forward. We should continue to cooperate with the City of Durham and Raleigh to purchase land on tributaries and streams that feed into our reservoirs. An excellent example of this is the purchase of 134 acres by the City, County and Raleigh upstream of Falls Lake. This land will not only provide stormwater control for Falls Lake, but will also be a large city park. The County can support the Durham Soil and Water Conservation Board in their strong efforts to protect our local environment.

On advocacy and collaboration:

We must work with the City, other municipalities in North Carolina, the state and federal governments, and utility partners, to advocate for broader policies that will fundamentally change the economics of renewable energy compared to fossil fuels. At the local level, I intend to work with local elected officials, community advocacy groups, and other candidates for office in the primary and general elections to build a high-level plan that sets out a Green New Deal for Durham. (You can see that work in progress at <https://greennewdealfordurham.org>.)

While those areas are key, there are even more things that we can and should do in County government. To name a few: better natural management of stormwater through swales and wetlands; better requirements for tree planting and street trees; a "green fund" for new innovative projects; reducing

waste and encouraging a circular economy; promoting local and regional food systems and farmers' markets. There is a lot of work to be done!

If you are an incumbent, how have you used your time in office to address the climate crisis?

In my 12 years on the school board and the last 3 years as a County Commissioner, protecting the environment for all of Durham has been an important area of my work.

In the public school system, sustainability was a consistent theme of my leadership. During my tenure on the Durham Public Schools Board of Education, I helped promote the Bionomic Educational Training Center (BETC), and I continue to support this program as a County Commissioner. The BETC Program was created in 2010 to teach students of the growing needs, demands and technological developments in agri-science, green industries and green infrastructure. This Program will lead to better-prepared graduates (and citizens) who understand relevant scientific concepts that pertain to agri-science and green industries, which will also promote environmental stewardship. The Program also provides social entrepreneurship opportunities. Integrating STEM concepts and humanitarian concepts, students learn how to solve current, important societal problems such as the relationship between storm water runoff and water quality. The past few summers, BETC students have installed rain gardens all across Durham.

I was an advocate for Safe Routes to School throughout my tenure. Over the years, we have received several grants for improving routes to school, and many of our schools have regular walk to school days.

Under my leadership on the Board of Education, we hired a Director of Sustainability to coordinate district-wide efforts to promote energy efficiency, conservation, and move toward the use of more renewable energy sources. This position saved the district hundreds of thousands of dollars per year in energy costs. And I worked with the Sustainability Coordinator for the City and County to encourage Durham Public Schools to partner with them in their Trees Across America program. Nearly all of our schools participated in planting trees on school campuses.

Durham Public Schools has designed and built LEED-certified schools and will continue to do this in the future. The designs for the newest elementary school on Scott King Road include many features to minimize impact on the environment. And I am a steering committee member for the Solar Schools plus Storage Initiative to work with Duke Energy to install solar infrastructure at public school campuses at no up-front cost.

As County Commissioner, I was the first local elected official to sign onto the Sunrise Movement's Green New Deal pledge to support Green New Deal federal legislation, and I pushed for the County's 2018 resolution to shift to renewable energy. I am one of the local elected officials across NC who signed onto a letter expressing support for Governor Cooper and his efforts and commitment to address the climate crisis and asking him to strengthen that commitment by opposing new and expanded natural gas infrastructure in NC. I led the adoption of the first County policy in North Carolina to prohibit the use of County funds to purchase single-use plastic water bottles and have resisted corporate pressure to inhibit that policy.

I serve on the Durham County Environmental Affairs Board, Bike and Pedestrian Advisory Committee, Farmland Preservation Board and have been active in Bike Durham. (I also commute for work and errands by bike as often as possible.)

With the guidance of the EAB and with my colleagues on the Board of County Commissioners, I have advocated that we turn planned County parking deck projects into mixed-use, affordable housing projects. That will provide 300 affordable homes in the center of downtown along with retail spaces and a child care center, rather than just another parking deck. And I have continued to work with the EAB to minimize the amount of parking in the second of those East Main Street projects so that our public funds are used wisely and efficiently. As mentioned above, I supported recent updates to our City and County ordinances to allow for increased housing density in the urban tier and to facilitate backyard cottages throughout the County.

How do you plan on addressing the intersection of the climate crisis with other issues, such as housing and inequality, faced by the people of Durham and North Carolina?

I have emphasized throughout this campaign that my guiding principles are racial equity and environmental sustainability, and it's particularly important to identify cases where those principles can work in harmony, as they often do.

Transportation is a key issue of racial and economic justice: because low-income residents and people of color disproportionately rely on our public transit system for access to jobs and services, because traffic violence impacts everyone but most often those people who are poor or live in black and brown neighborhoods and because climate change will have the greatest effects on our most vulnerable during floods, hurricanes and heat waves. Investing in public transit systems and active transportation networks is more sustainable and benefits the most vulnerable people in Durham.

As described above, I am proud of the work that Durham County is doing to directly build affordable housing at 300 and 500 East Main Street. Using publicly owned land for affordable housing is a key strategy for increasing our supply, and I fought to use these two County parking lots for not just a parking deck, but one that will be wrapped in mixed uses of housing, commercial, and office space. Working with our developer (a minority, woman-owned business) over 300 new affordable units will be built downtown near transit and services. This will help prevent downtown from becoming the realm of only rich white people.

But environmental justice also requires maintenance of existing housing. Along with the entire Board of County Commissioners, I have been overseeing the County's response to the emergency at McDougald Terrace. We requested daily reports on the coordination of services, such as public health screenings, mental health services, transportation and more. Preventing emergencies is more efficient and effective than responding to emergencies, although emergency response will always be necessary. Ongoing maintenance and providing funds for energy efficiency retrofits of both public housing and the homes of low-income homeowners can provide health and stability to families while also reducing our carbon emissions and saving residents money.

Economic security can also benefit from a local commitment to climate action. Retrofitting homes and buildings, constructing new transit infrastructure and developing community solar power can all provide good-paying local jobs to our residents. We should coordinate with Durham Tech and support local apprenticeship programs so that these retrofits and construction projects provide jobs to graduates of our schools.

Pledges

Have you signed the Green New Deal Pledge?

Yes, I was the first elected official in Durham County to sign the Green New Deal Pledge. I support and advocate for federal Green New Deal legislation, including marching in the climate strike here in Durham in December.

Will you sign the No Toxic Money Pledge?

We invite you to sign this new pledge, already signed by several candidates in North Carolina, and check out the official website (notoxicmoney.org) when it launches on February 14th!

Yes, I will sign the No Toxic Money Pledge. As far as I know, I have never taken money or gifts from Duke Energy's executives or PACs in this or any previous campaign. Given the climate crisis, I support a moratorium on new fossil fuel infrastructure projects.