June 22, 2021

Dear Commissioners,

We, the DCo Racial Equity Core Team - Government Alliance on Race and Equity (GARE) Cohort, are writing to you in our capacity as affected citizens regarding a matter of public concern. Allow us to begin by stating that we are grateful for the previous commitment of the Board to promote racial equity within local government and across Durham County. As you each know, racial equity work is a challenging and sacred trust to which we have all pledged our allegiance. We, however, have also promised not to turn a blind eye to the potential manifestation of inequity, no matter where it appears or from which seat of power it emanates. This is why we feel the need to engage the question that friends, colleagues and neighbors confront us with daily which is, how can the sudden and ill-defined manner in which the former County Manager was relieved of his duties, be reconciled with our pledge to maintain equitable treatment for all races?

Many would hold that former County Manager Davis was accomplished and experienced and that his departure was not due to job performance, as stated by the Board. We believe he is credited with navigating the organization through a global pandemic, helping the enterprise achieve one of the highest municipal credit ratings in the state, aiding the County in realizing previously unseen levels of population growth and investment, beginning the implementation of several Commissioner initiatives (including universal Pre-K), enjoying a high level of support from employees across County Government, and several other accomplishments. If those points are taken into consideration, it appears that this treatment of immediately relieving him of his duties prior to the expiration of his contract was not only inconsistent with his satisfactory job performance, but was also embedded with a mean-spiritedness and lack of decorum that has permeated relationships across County Government and increasingly the community at large.

The means by which the former Manager was fired has left a high degree of uncertainty and an overriding sense of concern among some employees. Many of them feel silenced by the way the Manager was immediately dismissed. These perceptions by several employees, citizens and community groups have begun to negatively impact County Government’s ability to: serve its diverse public and recruit new employees committed to the highest ideals of inclusive governance. It demonstrates a lack of willingness to grapple with difficult issues which will ultimately make the community more resilient. How do we address the concerns of Durham County citizens and employees who fear retaliation and retribution if they dare to speak up about racism, or worse, fear being silenced or terminated? How do we proceed with our charge to examine structural inequities based on race in our community and County Government if we cannot interrogate the impact of our own actions? The Coleman Report, with its challenging findings, serves as additional supporting evidence that our collective course may benefit from a co-designed reset by County leadership and the staff who work to implement our shared vision.

We request as citizens that the time is now for all of us to begin healing by 1. The entire Board of County Commissioners attending racial equity training and mediation together, as recommended and defined by the Coleman report; 2. Improving interpersonal relations on the Board and with the Board’s interactions towards staff and citizens (As we are working to train employees, what message does it send that our Commissioners appear to be resisting training?). 3. As citizens speaking on an area of public concern and as members of County’s Racial Equity Core Team, we request that the Board employ racial equity tools to its future decision making processes and further move to add a racial equity directive as a high level, guiding principle to each of County Government’s five strategic plan goal areas, in order to avoid disparate impacts among not only its managers, but its employees and citizens. 4. We request that the Board engage in an open town hall to address inequity and race relations in Durham and in Durham County Government and thereby continuing the hard work of striving for racial equity. We look forward to hearing your response, which may be coordinated through the County Racial Equity Officer. Thank you.

Sincerely,

The Majority of the Durham County Racial Equity Core (GARE) Team