

INTERVIEW WITH DURHAM COUNTY INFORMATION SPECIALIST

On June 20, I visited Ms. Dawn Dudley, the Public Information Specialist of Durham County. Her job is to **influence** the actions of her target audience: internally, the employees of Durham County government, and externally, the citizens of Durham County.

I learned about county commissioners and their roles in county government. In each county, there are five elected county commissioners who sit for four-year terms. Currently, the five county commissioners of Durham County are Michael Page, Ellen Reckhow, Brenda Howerton, Fred Foster, and Wendy Jacobs. These five people supervise the activities of the county, approve the budget, and represent Durham in larger meetings, among other things. During the BOCC's work sessions on the first Monday of every month, any citizen of Durham County can present any issue and gets 3 minutes to speak. At the BOCC's regular sessions, every second and fourth Mondays of every month, citizens may sign up at least 30 minutes before the meeting to speak about items on the agenda. Citizens get, on average, 2 minutes to speak on consent items, items which have already been approved, and 3 minutes to speak on other items.

An item on the agenda recently was the budget for Durham's fiscal year 2012-2013. After proposed in a regular session, comments on budget can be written and public hearings with the people of Durham are held. These public hearings allow the citizens of Durham to give opinions on the budget. Voices of the people can spark more research to be done, but if no edits are to be made, the County Commissioners will vote on the budget. A typical timeline typically looks something like this: the budget will be presented by the last regular meeting in May, the budget will be discussed and edited, and finally, the budget must be adopted within twenty-four hours of the beginning of the next fiscal year, which begins on July 1st.

Finally, to prepare for discussions at the NCACC Youth Voices conference, I asked Ms. Dudley what she believed were the issues facing youth in Durham. She provided me with the results of two surveys:

First, Extension's Kids Voting Program which revealed that Durham County youth in schools cared deeply about the state of lunches, bathrooms, and available job resources.

Second, Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), attempts to monitor risk behaviors like tobacco use, unhealthy diets, and violence. It showed concern with safety, crime and lack of money. Major concerns were: lack of exercise, bullying, and gangs. A lack of time spent with adults, and a lack of healthy eating were also seen as significant risk factors.

In Addition, my 4H club, Jr. Leadership Durham 4H, did a survey of 255 students, in the 2011-12 school year, using the 2011 Youth Voices 10 statewide Teen Concerns. Top four in Durham were: Economics (lack of jobs), Violence, Drugs, & Teen Pregnancy increase.

Clearly, teens have opinions, and we should attempt to educate ourselves on County government and the possibilities!

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