

December 16, 2008

Governor-Elect Beverly Perdue
Mail Service Center 20305
Raleigh, NC 27699-20305

Dear Beverly:

Congratulations upon your election as Governor of North Carolina. I am sure as you read the election returns you noted that Durham County contributed in a major way to your victory. Indeed, you received 93,338 votes which represented nearly 72 percent of the total votes cast. We in Durham look forward to working with you on addressing the major challenges facing our state and at our local level as well.

As a City Councilman and member of the Durham Crime Cabinet we have labored for years attempting to get state government more involved in public safety and the criminal justice system in our community. The results to date have been rather frustrating.

That is why so many elected officials were pleased to read your committed response to the News and Observer's excellent and revealing series on North Carolina's broken probation system. You acknowledged the obvious: "The whole system is in need of repair. It puts life at risk. There is a disconnect that has to be fixed, and I am going to fix it."

We here in Durham County and the Durham Crime Cabinet, including Mayor Bill Bell, Councilman Howard Clement and County Commissioner Ellen Reckhow and others as well, are eager to join you in helping to "fix it."

Please consider the following suggestions:

Address the staffing problems: Increase salaries, enhance training and fill the numerous vacancies. State-wide, the high turn-over rate is deplorable and adds to the morale problems within the agency.

Sod over the turf battles: Currently our criminal justice system is balkanized by turf battles and lack of communication. The recommendation of a Criminal Justice

Coordinating Council which would provide general policy guidance and oversight seems like a good idea.

In addition to our problematic probation system, North Carolina ranks near the bottom nationally in expenditures per capital on our entire criminal justice system. If we are to make any progress this has as to change.

Follow the money: Last spring after the Carson and Mahato murders, our crime cabinet lobbied for more resources to address staffing issues within the probation system. The General Assembly allocated \$2.5 million to fill 26 vacancies out of a state wide total of 118 vacant positions. This is a start, but where is the money for these probations officers, why haven't the jobs ever been posted, and since we have currently 16 out of 71 vacancies, how many positions will Durham receive?

Clean House: Obviously your decision, but I doubt anyone who reads and understands the News and Observer series will come away believing that the top management in Correction and Probation Departments should remain in their positions. Such failed leadership in the past cannot take us into the future. High standards, accountability and performance evaluations should play a major role in these departments as well as throughout state government.

Cut off the spigot: Currently there are approximately 118,000 citizens on probation in North Carolina and that could be too many. A properly working and successful state system helps turn lives around so the probationers become productive and contributing citizens. Unfortunately, for the most part, North Carolina does not have such a system. Any state that has so many absconders, 12 percent state wide and 831 alone in Durham County; and any state that has offenders supposedly under the supervision of probation officers, yet they commit 580 homicides during the last nine years... that system is not working.

Public safety has to be, first and foremost, the state's top concern. In all candor, our system presents such a hazard and grave risk to the citizens of our state that we should re-evaluated those who are allowed to enter our probation system. Probation should not be viewed as a right, but as a privilege. No one should be allowed to enter the system until a complete and thorough evaluation based upon past criminal history and mental well-being is completed. Our probation system is overwhelmed and under-functioning. This is a state-wide emergency and we must respond accordingly. As a result we cannot, at least for several years, continue to overburden the system by infusing it with so many offenders. An annual reduction of twenty to thirty percent of those normally released on the streets could help guard the public and give our system time, in your words, Beverly, "to be fixed"

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December 16, 2008
Page 3

Hire no consultants: Please do not waste time or money on additional analysis of the system. We know what the issues are and what needs to be done. Review the National Institute of Corrections, Technical Assistance Report and their 35 recommendations on improving our current system. Issued this August, it is a blueprint on how to build a better system, one that serves those on probation as well as the taxpayers and general public. In addition, there is the Gartner Group Report that examines our judicial system as a whole. Although, about nine years old, it still contains useful recommendations most of which, unfortunately, were not implemented by state government.

Make technology a top priority: Kudos to Senate President Pro Tem Mark Bassnight for hooking us up with SAS. Linking the state to the legacy system and providing a strategic information system is mandatory. We also need to eliminate the stone-age technology still in use, update our computers, software and data sharing. NC Aware, which has been discussed for years is targeted to our courts and magistrates and is needed to enhance our warrant systems. All of this is expensive but can lead to greater efficiency among staff and improve public safety.

Stand firm: Everyone knows this is a tight budget year, but state government needs to reorder its priorities and put more money where our real problems are. I can think of no better place to start than with our probation system and just as importantly, the overall criminal justice system.

The News and Observer probation series has raised concerns and stimulated debate. This is good, but after the headlines fade and the lobbying for scarce resources begins within the General Assembly, we must build a contingency who understands the vital important of these issues and is willing to lead our fight for public safety.

In the past we have seen more promises than revenues, and when you think about it, only turtle-like progress has been made since the Carson/Mahato murders became national news ten months ago. This broken system cannot be made whole by more empty promises or simply tinkering around the edges. Systemic change and an infusion of revenues are needed. I hope we can count on your leadership.

Sincerely,

Eugene. A. Brown
Durham City Councilman
Durham Crime Cabinet