



Date: September 3, 2025

To: Durham City Council
Durham County Board of Commissioners

From: Dan Harrop, Chair, Durham City-County Appearance Commission

Subject: Durham City-County Appearance Commission – New Proposal

Commission Overview

The Durham City-County Appearance Commission is an advisory board whose mission is *to cultivate visual appeal and recognize the benefits of good design, which enhance the quality of life for the residents of the City and County of Durham*. The Commission members are appointed by both the City Council and Board of County Commissioners. Commission members have a variety of backgrounds including architecture, landscape architecture, interior design, healthcare, and city planning, as well as residents interested in design and appearance issues.

Background

Over the past five years, the Commission has struggled with quorum and member retention, making it difficult to meet consistently or maintain momentum on projects. Frequent resignations, often due to personal or professional commitments, and inconsistent attendance have hindered the Commission's ability to function effectively.

Historically, the Appearance Commission played an important role in promoting good design, particularly when Durham lacked strong zoning and design standards. However, with the implementation of the Unified Development Ordinance (UDO) and its ongoing updates, much of the Commission's former influence has been transferred to planning staff and constrained further by state legislation. As other groups like Keep Durham Beautiful and Preservation Durham take on overlapping work, the Commission's role has narrowed. Facing these structural and functional challenges, staff and Commission members have explored options for restructuring or redefining the Commission's future.

Survey

Since presenting these issues to the Joint City-County Planning Committee in February, the Commission met to discuss future work as a task force. Members answered the following questions in a survey:

- What are/were your expectations or reasons for joining the commission? What type of influence or impact do you imagine the commission having?
- What is your preference for City or County participation in guiding the group's work? What kind of clarity do you need? (for example, do you want the city to provide discrete tasks or be more open ended)
- Do you want to continue as a member of the commission?
- If the Commission were dissolved as a formal commission, what form would you want for our work to continue?
- Do you prefer virtual, in person, or a mix of meeting types?
- Please include an ideal mission statement for the commission if you have one.

In summary, members of the Appearance Commission are motivated to serve Durham through the lens of design, aiming to influence public spaces, architecture, and community aesthetics. To make meaningful progress, members emphasize the need for focused, actionable projects that align with city and county goals, supported by clear leadership and resources. They are open to drafting short-term proposals, exploring equity-driven design work, and forming strategic partnerships. However, the Commission's future success depends on better structure, consistent follow-through, and a renewed mission that provides clarity, purpose, and measurable impact.

Proposal

The Commission supports the staff recommendation to terminate the Interlocal Cooperation Agreement and shift to working as a design-focused task force—potentially modeled after the existing Homebuilders Association (HBA) quarterly meetings with staff.

Durham City-County Appearance Commission Members (as of 6/30/2025)

Dan Harrop (Chair), Hemant Desai (Secretary), Israfil Brandon, Nya Furtick, Quinton Holloway, Connor Kirkpatrick, Nikki-Nicole Miles, Charles Simpson, Alison Steele, and Caitlin Wheeler

Sincerely,

Dan Harrop, Chair