



## Tackling transit issues, new board member draws on his early experiences

At his first political rally decades ago, Patrick Hannah – GoTriangle’s newest Board of Trustees member – says he discovered his passion for bringing about positive change that has since energized his work in transit.

A former high school athlete, Hannah says at the time, he was struck by the similarities between sports competition and political campaigns.

“I drew upon the sense of how sports teams compete based on their team, and who has the best team wins,” says Hannah, who became the board’s Durham city and county representative in 2023. “I drew that sort of same energy, when I went to my first political rally, as relates to what ideas can do to help change community. You’re really competing for that privilege of representing people. That’s one of the things that motivated me years

ago. But I would say what continued to be my passion is realizing how transformative our transportation system can be. Regardless of our political background, we all have to get around.”

Born in Hope, Arkansas, Hannah graduated from the historic Little Rock Central High, home of the “**Little Rock Nine**,” where he played football and ran track. He graduated from Morehouse College in Atlanta and worked in commercial banking before moving to North Carolina, in 1997, to attend North Carolina Central University, where he earned his law degree. Through it all, he has never forgotten the strong women who raised him. His mother was a teenager in college when she became pregnant with him, and his grandmother and great-grandmother insisted that she continue her education to become the first in their family to go to college. They offered to raise him.

“And that one decision allowed my mother to eventually get her Ph.D., and she became a public school superintendent,” he says. “I am the product of very modest beginnings, but a whole lot of love and encouragement. It was a wonderful childhood. ... Three strong black women raised me, and they made me who I am today, and taught me values of what it means to be a man. There’s a sentiment that it takes a man to raise a man, and that’s not true. It’s really not about who raises you. It’s about teaching you strong values and keeping you able to move forward.”

While in his second year at NCCU law school, Hannah was a law clerk in the White House Office of Legal Counsel, and after graduating, started his own political consulting firm providing strategic advice and advocacy to candidates running for national, statewide and local office. He ended his consulting practice in 2004 after the birth of his son born 14 weeks prematurely, which he says changed his life – and that of his wife, Takeila – forever. After learning their son has autism, the couple became passionate about advocating for autism awareness and early intervention.

Hannah began work at Womble Carlyle, doing complex litigation defense work, but within a year returned to his passion of government affairs and advocacy, becoming the vice president for the Durham Chamber of Commerce. When asked to serve as special assistant to the chancellor of NCCU and director of Government and Communication Relations, he accepted, so he could give back to his law school alma mater. At NCCU, he helped develop the 20-year master plan and implemented the strategy for getting the plan passed unanimously by the board.

“I really enjoyed that work, working with our community, our faculty, our staff and the university to continue to provide a high-quality education for students from across the country,” he says.

He left that job to serve as corporate attorney for a Fortune 70 property & casualty insurance company, where he has been for 15 years and is now senior

corporate counsel for the Southeast U.S. During his professional career, Hannah has also volunteered to serve on transit boards, including the Durham Area Transit Authority and the Raleigh Durham International Airport Authority, both of which he chaired.

“I’ve always seen transportation as this way of bringing communities together, and I’ve always enjoyed that,” he says. “So, I’ve always been passionate about what infrastructure, transit and transportation in general can do to connect people to live their best lives.”

While on the DATA board, he started the PRIDE Ambassador Program, which he says he is proud of because he believes in the power of collaboration. P.R.I.D.E. stood for “People Riding in Durham Every day,” and was a way to identify people who could be the board’s eyes and ears and report back at meetings. The program was well received and helped engage transit riders in learning about planning while building a relationship of trust and communication so the board could set good policy, he says.

As a new board member at GoTriangle, Hannah says he’s practicing active listening to learn the issues, but knows one of the biggest challenges facing transit across the nation is competing for limited funding sources. He wonders if GoTriangle can tap non-governmental funding for projects, but he says he doesn’t know yet if that’s legally possible.

“Coming up with creative solutions to finance projects to build infrastructure that’s needed, regardless of whether it’s rail or fixed-route, we’re going to have to be innovative and look for more strategic partners outside of local government,” he says. I don’t know what the barriers of entry are, yet I can tell you that in the aviation space, having been on the airport authority for 8 ½ years and having chaired the board during the pandemic, and having passed the budget that is going to build a \$500 million runway, the policies that we set helped shape that ability.”

For GoTriangle as a regional transit authority, he says it’s going to be critical for the board to do what’s in the best interest of the region in making sure that the system serves the region equitably and equally.

“As policy makers when we walk into that room, we represent the system and the region, not our local governments,” he says. “So, how do we come together as a region and how do we use the time that we have to make an impact that’s going to make GoTriangle be the best system that it can be, a world-class system, in the next 20 years?”

On a more personal note, he says having a child with special needs has made him passionate about ensuring that the most vulnerable people have excellent access to transit.

“I think our paratransit system is very critical for the people who need it the most, and we need to make sure that we are investing in our paratransit system, just as much, if not more, than our fixed-route system,” he says. “Because the people who rely on that system have so many more challenges in life than we do. And so, that’s something that I will continue to advocate for – is a high-quality paratransit system that is very committed to serving the paratransit community.”