



Leadership North Carolina Class 33

Environment Session

April 14-16, 2026

Speaker Directory

Ms. Jael Skeffington

Co-Founder/Chief Executive Officer
French Broad Chocolate
821 Riverside Avenue
Asheville, NC 28801
(828) 252-4181
tours@frenchbroadchocolates.com

Jael Skeffington, Co-Founder & CEO of French Broad Chocolates in Asheville, NC, believes in using business as a force for good.

Jael's passion for chocolate was born in 2003, when she and her co-founder, Dan, drove a veggie oil-powered school bus to the cacao-rich tropics of Costa Rica and opened a restaurant called Bread & Chocolate. While living there for two years, they visited cacao farms, got to know cacao farmers, and learned about theobroma cacao, the plant from which chocolate is made. Inspired to continue their path in chocolate, they moved to Asheville and founded French Broad Chocolate in 2006.

Guided by a mission to source with integrity and craft with intention, French Broad Chocolate builds meaningful relationships with sustainable farmers and producers and transforms fine cacao beans into craft chocolate in their experiential Chocolate Factory in Asheville, NC. Bean-to-bar to bonbon and beyond means they create not only their artisan chocolate bars, but also a compendium of confections and desserts featuring their chocolate paired with local, fresh, and organic ingredients. Their creations can be enjoyed at French Broad Chocolate Lounge, their destination dessert restaurant; at their Chocolate Factory & Café; or through delivery, with the Asheville experience sent directly to you from frenchbroadchocolate.com. Their chocolates have been recognized with many national and international awards.

Jael serves on the Board of Directors of the Economic Development Coalition in Asheville/Buncombe County and is a founding Board Member and Vice President of Chow Chow, an Asheville Culinary Event, whose mission is to celebrate and enrich the unique foodways of the Southern Appalachian region.

Mr. Mike LaVoie

Natural Resources Director
Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians
Post Office Box 1747
Cherokee, NC 28719
(828) 359-6113
michlavo@ebci-nsn.gov

Mike LaVoie currently serves as the Natural Resources Director for Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, where he leads initiatives to protect, restore, and sustainably manage the Tribe's natural resources. Mike completed his M.S. in Biology at Western Carolina University and worked in government and university settings prior to beginning his tenure with the EBCI in 2007. Mike also currently serves as the Vice-President/Board of Directors for the Native American Fish and Wildlife Society. He currently works closely with tribal leadership, government agencies, and community stakeholders to promote ecological stewardship across ancestral Cherokee lands.

Dr. Kathie Dello

LNC Class 31

Assistant Secretary for Resilience
North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality
217 West Jones Street
Raleigh, NC 27603
kathie.dello@deq.nc.gov

Dr. Kathie Dello serves as the Assistant Secretary for Resilience at DEQ, where she leads the department's efforts to strengthen North Carolina's resilience to withstand increasingly severe weather. She leads the efforts of the Division of Coastal Management, State Energy Office, Albemarle-Pamlico National Estuary Program (APNEP), Flood Resiliency Blueprint and the State Resilience Office.

Prior to joining the department in 2025, she served as State Climatologist of North Carolina and Director of the State Climate Office at NC State University. Kathie's work has been recognized nationally for advancing climate resilience, stakeholder engagement, and science communication in New York, Oregon and North Carolina. She is author of the 5th National Climate Assessment and the 2020 North Carolina Climate Science Report. She is a 2024 graduate of Leadership North Carolina. In 2025, Governor Josh Stein awarded her the North Carolina Award in Science, the state's highest civilian honor.

Dr. Dello holds a Ph.D. in Environmental Sciences from Oregon State University, a Master's in Geography and a Bachelor's in Atmospheric Sciences from the State University of New York at Albany. She resides in Raleigh.

Dr. Chris Lamont Brown

Co-Director for Research and Education
North Carolina Environmental Justice Network
3434 Edwards Mill Road, Suite 112-378
Raleigh, NC 27612
(984) 884-6235
chris@ncejn.org

Dr. Chris Lamont Brown is the Co-Director for Research and Education for the North Carolina Environmental Justice Network. Dr. Brown works with communities impacted by environmental racism and connects them to researchers, students, and teachers to create evidence-based advocacy and increase EJ competency in the classroom.

Prior to this role, Dr. Brown was a professor of Geography and Environmental Systems at the UMBC in Baltimore. They created and critiqued participatory research to improve actionable research for EJ communities.

Dr. Brown continues NCEJN's legacy for finding unlikely collaborators to shift power for social justice. They founded the Spidey Sens-r project, where communities monitor air quality issues by collecting spider webs. Dr. Brown was recently honored with the Black and Green 40 Under 40 Award by the Black Millennials for Flint.

The Honorable Stephen M. Ross

Representative, District 63
North Carolina General Assembly
16 West Jones Street, Room 1229
Raleigh, NC 27601
(919) 733-5820
Stephen.Ross@ncleg.gov

Stephen Ross is serving the people of Alamance County in his sixth term in the North Carolina General Assembly. A Burlington native and graduate of Walter M. Williams High School, he also graduated from Elon University, where he is a member of the Phi Beta Kappa National Honor Society. He then attended North Carolina State University in the Master of Public Administration Program. Steve is a proud Eagle Scout and serves as a life member of the National Eagle Scout Association and was named Man of the Year by the Boy Scouts Old North State Council in 2021.

Serving twenty years with the Burlington City Council, including two terms as Mayor, Steve enjoys serving others and fixing problems. He received recognition as one of the Triad's Most Influential People by the Triad Business Journal and served as Chairman of the Piedmont Triad Council of Governments.

Rep. Ross received the Legislator of the Year from the NC League of Municipalities for his work as a Community Champion and was also named Legislator of the Year by the NC Metro Mayors Coalition for his work in restoring Historic Tax Credits. He was also a founding member Mayor of the NC Metro Mayors coalition.

Rep. Ross is a graduate of the Center for Advancement of Leadership Skills with the Southern Legislative conference and a Henry Toll Fellowship Graduate with the National Council of State Governments.

Equally notable is his volunteer service as past President of the Alamance Division of the American Heart Association, the Piedmont Triad Regional Transportation board, and the Piedmont Triad Economic Development Partnership. In addition to his government and community service, Steve also has an extensive background in the private sector as a Financial Advisor.

Steve currently serves as Chairman of the Commerce Committee, Chairman of the Finance Committee, and as a member of the State and Local Government, Pensions and Retirement and Transportation Committees.

He and his wife Tammy have four daughters and seven grandchildren and are members of St. Mark's Reformed Church. They enjoy spending time with their family and many outdoor activities including camping, hiking, and spending time at the beach.

Mr. Will Summer

Executive Director, North Carolina Land and Water Fund and Director, Division of Land and Water Stewardship

North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources

109 East Jones Street

Raleigh, NC 27601

(919) 707-9489

will.summer@dncr.nc.gov

Will Summer is the Director of the Division of Land and Water Stewardship and Executive Director of the North Carolina Land and Water Fund (NCLWF – formerly known as the Clean Water Management Trust Fund).

During his tenure with the NCLWF, he has served in several roles including Deputy Director, Stewardship Program Manager, and Field Representative. Prior to joining NCLWF in 2008, he worked for International Paper and subsequently the NC Forest Service, studying riparian (streamside) buffers and their importance in protecting water quality during forest management activities.

He is originally from Georgia and holds a B.S. in Forest Environmental Resources and an M.S. in Forest Hydrology from the University of Georgia, and a Master of Public Administration from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. It was his deep understanding and appreciation for the critical role that riparian buffers play in protecting our streams and rivers that first attracted him to the mission of the NCLWF. It is the lasting benefits of conservation and restoration that keep him excited to come to work every day.

The Honorable Zeb Smathers

Mayor
Canton, NC
85 Summer Street
Canton, NC 28176
(828) 648-8240
zsmathers@gmail.com

Mayor Zeb Smathers was first elected as the Mayor of Canton in 2017. He assumed a regional leadership role on the issue of flooding following the devastating flooding resulting from Tropical Storm Fred and again in response to Hurricane Helene. He also became a fixture on local and national media programs for leadership concerning the sudden closing of Evergreen Packaging, Haywood County's manufacturing hub and source of 1,100 jobs, in 2023.

Mayor Smathers and his team are committed to a comprehensive, bipartisan vision that allows Canton to bring about a future of new ideas and possibilities without losing what made the town special . . . her people and history as a "Milltown."

The Honorable Maggie Ullman

Council Member, Asheville City Council
Founder and Principal, Ullman Consulting
Post Office Box 7148
Asheville, NC 28802
(828) 251-1122
maggiuellman@avlcouncil.com

With a distinguished career in sustainability, philanthropy, and municipal leadership, Councilwoman Maggie Ullman currently serves on the Asheville City Council, where she chairs the Environment and Safety Council Committee and contributes to key economic, policy, and human resources initiatives. As the Founder and Principal of Ullman Consulting, she has led strategic planning efforts for national philanthropic coalitions, climate action networks, and sustainability-focused organizations.

Previously, Ullman held leadership roles at the ClimateWorks Foundation, where she coordinated international climate philanthropy efforts, and co-founded the Southeast Sustainability Directors Network, strengthening sustainability collaboration across the region. Her tenure as Asheville's Chief Sustainability Officer saw the launch of the first climate action program in the South, leading to a 17.65% carbon footprint reduction. Through a career spanning public service, nonprofit leadership, and climate advocacy, Ullman remains committed to driving impactful environmental and policy solutions.

Mr. Nathan Ramsey

Executive Director, Land of Sky Regional Council
Director, Mountain Area Workforce Development Board
339 New Leicester Highway, Suite 140
Asheville, NC 28806
nathan@landofsky.org

Nathan is the Executive Director of Land of Sky Regional Council serving Buncombe, Henderson, Madison, and Transylvania Counties. He also serves as Director of Mountain Area Workforce Development Board. Prior to this role he was a Business Services Representative for the North Carolina Department of Commerce. Nathan served in the North Carolina General Assembly representing House District 115 from 2013 to 2014 and as Chairman of the Buncombe County Board of Commissioners from 2000 to 2008.

Nathan grew up in Fairview in Buncombe County. He is a graduate of AC Reynolds High School, UNC Asheville, and the University of Tennessee College of Law. He is a member of the NC State Bar. Nathan is married to Robin, and they live on the family dairy farm.

Mr. Corey Hoilman

Assistant Director, Farmland Preservation Division
North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services
1001 Mail Service Center
Raleigh, NC 27601
(919) 707-3069
Corey.Hoilman@ncagr.gov

Corey has been with the NC Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services since 2015, starting out with the Veterinary Division where he worked primarily with tasks related to animal disease traceability, movement, and importation regulations. He served as the budget officer for the Emergency Programs Division beginning in 2018, and he worked as a member of the department's incident management teams during natural disasters and animal disease outbreaks, notably Hurricane Florence in 2018 and the low- and high-path avian influenza responses in 2020 and 2022.

Corey has been with the Farmland Preservation Division since October 2022. His primary areas of focus are the fair and consistent administration of the grant application and contract processes, along with the monitoring and stewardship component that ensures taxpayer dollars were wisely spent and that the terms of those recorded agreements continue to be upheld, often in perpetuity. He is a 2002 graduate of Appalachian State University, and he lives in Fuquay-Varina with his wife and children.

Mr. Kaleb Rathbone

Assistant Commissioner, Western NC Agricultural Programs and Small Farms
North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services
1001 Mail Service Center
Raleigh, NC 27699
(919) 707-3016
Kaleb.Rathbone@ncagr.gov

Kaleb Rathbone serves as Assistant Commissioner for Western NC Agricultural Programs with the North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services. His area of responsibilities includes the WNC Ag Center, WNC Farmers Market, Mountain State Fair, and the Small Farms Division. Prior to being appointed to his current role, Kaleb served as Director of the Research Stations Division with NCDA and NC State University and as Superintendent of the Mountain Research Station in Waynesville.

Kaleb grew up on a family farm in Western North Carolina raising burley tobacco, beef cattle, and strawberries, and he remains an active partner in the operation. Kaleb serves on the boards of AgSouth Farm Credit, Haywood Community College, as well as other community and civic organizations. Kaleb and his wife Monica have four sons: Mason, Grant, Reid, and Joe.

Mr. Jason Davis

Farmer
North River Farms
3333 North Mills River Road
Mills River, NC 28759
(828) 699-0855
northriverfarms3333@gmail.com

Jason Davis opened North River Farms in 1999 with little more than a lifetime knowledge of farming, a sense of community, and a dream. His goal is to provide the highest quality hay and produce to the people of Western North Carolina and that's exactly what North River Farms has done for the last 20 years.

North River Farms specializes in row crops, forage, vegetables, and agritourism. In 2018, Jason created DB bar D Outfitters as a part of his agritourism division. With this company he allows guided and membership requests to fly fish the beautiful North and South Mills River as well as host guided turkey, bear, and deer trips in Mills River.

In 2019, Jason saw the need for places to board horses as the equestrian demand began to grow in Western North Carolina. He was able to create Davis Ranch LLC, which includes four farms with different trainers and disciplines where they can run programs, board multiple horses, and host Open Shows and Dressage Shows throughout the year.

When Jason isn't running North River Farms, he's working to improve the community of Mills River. He is a board member of Farm Bureau, the Southern States, and Agribusiness of Henderson County. He currently sits on the County Extension Advisory Board and the Town of Mills River Agriculture Advisory Board. He also serves as a board member and Assistant Chief for Mills River Fire Rescue.

Jason lives in Mills River with his wife, Chae, and their three sons. The boys love helping their dad on the farm and learning everything there is to know about the agriculture of Western North Carolina.

Mr. Steven J. Levitas

Interim Executive Director
New Energy Economics
17 Westover Drive
Asheville, NC 28801
steve.levitas@gmail.com

Steve Levitas is a solar industry veteran and nationally respected authority on energy policy. He currently serves as Interim Executive Director of New Energy Economics, a non-profit energy policy research organization. In 2025, Governor Josh Stein appointed Steve to the North Carolina Utilities

Commission to fill a temporary vacancy. Prior to that time, he served as Senior VP for Regulatory and Government Affairs at Pine Gate Renewables. In addition to leading Pine Gate's policy team, Steve devoted much of his time to expanding the offtake opportunities for independently owned solar generation resources through competitive procurement program design, voluntary customer programs, PURPA implementation, and market reform. He worked extensively on the development and passage of landmark clean energy legislation in North Carolina in both 2017 and 2021, as well as in the initial proceeding before the North Carolina Utilities Commission in 2022 leading to the adoption of a plan to reduce Duke Energy's carbon emissions by 70%. He has also been heavily involved in matters relating to transmission and interconnection policies and procedures.

Steve previously served as Senior Vice President of Regulatory Affairs and Strategy for Cypress Creek Renewables, where he led the company's regulatory and government activities and advised the company about the impact of public policy on its commercial strategy. Prior to joining Cypress Creek, Steve served as Vice President for Business Affairs and General Counsel for FLS Energy and spent over twenty years in private law practice, concentrating on renewable energy project development and environmental regulatory matters.

From 1993 through 1996, Steve served as Deputy Secretary of the North Carolina Department of Environment, Health, and Natural Resources. Prior to his service in state government, Steve was Director and Senior Attorney of the North Carolina office of the Environmental Defense Fund, which he opened in 1988. Steve has served on the board of directors of numerous non-profit organizations, including the Center for Energy Education, the Solar Energy Industries Association, and the Carolinas Clean Energy Business Association. He is a graduate of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Harvard Law School.

Mr. Venu Ghanta

LNC Class 31

VP, Regulatory Affairs and Policy
Duke Energy
410 South Wilmington Street
Raleigh, NC 27604
venu.ghanta@duke-energy.com

Venu Ghanta serves as vice president of regulatory affairs and policy for Duke Energy. In this role, he manages the company's presence in all North Carolina regulatory matters before the North Carolina Utilities Commission (NCUC). He provides leadership and direction in the development and implementation of public policy that is in the best interest of the customers and communities served by Duke Energy.

Previously, Ghanta served as vice president of federal regulatory affairs for Duke Energy, leading and directing the company's development and advocacy of federal regulatory policy. In this role, he also led the establishment of the company's first-ever environmental justice principles.

Prior to coming to Duke Energy, he worked for nearly a decade at the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), where he received the EPA Gold Medal for Exceptional Service and the EPA Science Achievement Award. He was also selected to serve as special assistant to EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson from 2010-2012.

Ghanta previously worked in the medical device industry, where his work resulted in multiple patents and publications. From 2001-2004, he served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Nepal and Namibia.

He received a bachelor's degree in chemical engineering from the University of Michigan, a master's degree in chemical engineering from the University of California at Berkeley, and a master's degree in environmental sciences and policy from Johns Hopkins University. He currently serves on the board of directors of Advanced Energy. Ghanta resides in Cary, NC, with his wife and two daughters.

Dr. Susan N. White

Executive Director, NC Sea Grant College Program
Director, Water Resources Research Institute of UNC
Director, NC Space Grant
850 Main Campus Drive, Toxicology Building 105
Raleigh, NC 27606
(919) 515-2455
snwhite3@ncsu.edu

Susan White is the executive director for [North Carolina Sea Grant](#), the [Water Resources Research Institute for the University of North Carolina](#), and [North Carolina Space Grant](#). All three programs provide targeted research, outreach, and education projects to address critical issues in the state and within the region. Sea Grant, with funding from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and WRRRI, with funding from the U.S. Geological Survey, focus on coastal, ocean, and water resource topics for ecosystems and communities. Space Grant projects, with funding from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, include partnerships with the aerospace industry.

In fall 2017, White was named chair of the NC Sediment Control Commission by Gov. Roy Cooper. She previously was director of NOAA's Hollings Marine Laboratory in Charleston, SC. Formerly the national research coordinator for NOAA's Estuarine Reserves Division and National Estuarine Research Reserve System, she has served on national and regional steering committees on topics including technology transfer, integrated drought monitoring and early warning, and climate's connections to health. White earned a doctorate from the University of Georgia and a bachelor's degree from Duke University.

Mr. Brian Wuertz

Outreach Education Manager
Friends of the WNC Nature Center
PO Box 19151
Asheville, NC 28815
(828) 259-8488
education@wildwnc.org

Brian manages the Outreach Education program for Friends of the WNC Nature Center, connecting WNC communities to wildlife through educational partnerships. Prior to his current role, Brian worked as a Community Engagement Educator at the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences at Whiteville. In this position, he collaborated closely with the Waccamaw Siouan Tribe to thoughtfully incorporate and elevate Indigenous culture within natural science communication.

Brian holds a Bachelor of Science in Biology and Biochemistry from Warren Wilson College. He is a member of the NPCA Southeast Young Leaders Council, advocating for public lands and wildlife connectivity in our region. He previously served on the Board of Directors for the Environmental Educators of North Carolina, where he focused on policies that promote environmental education in NC.

Ms. Cassie Payne

Education Specialist
Friends of the WNC Nature Center
PO Box 19151
Asheville, NC 28815
community@wildwnc.org

As the Education Specialist for the Friends of the WNC Nature Center, Cassie Payne brings conservation education into classrooms, community centers, and organizations throughout the region. In this role, she strives to inspire people of all ages to care more deeply about the natural world, especially the animals of the Southern Appalachians, by helping them form meaningful, lasting connections to wildlife.

Her passion for the environment began at an early age, leading her to pursue a degree in Environmental Studies from Eckerd College in St. Petersburg, FL. Since then, Cassie has had the opportunity to teach environmental education across the country, from California to North Carolina, sharing her love for nature and empowering others to take action in their own communities. She is the Education Liaison for the AVL ReWild Chapter of the NC Wildlife Federation and planned the 2023 Environmental Educators of NC Conference as a member of the EENC Board of Directors.

Ms. Sharon Decker

LNC Class 1

Senior Advisor to Governor Josh Stein on
Economic Recovery of Western North Carolina
61 South Ambrose Drive
Tryon, NC 28782
(828) 429-6181
sharon@sharondecker.com

Sharon Decker is a respected leader, entrepreneur, and community builder whose career has spanned the public, private, and nonprofit sectors across North Carolina. As Governor Josh Stein's Senior Advisor for Long-Term Recovery in Western North Carolina, she is helping guide the region's restoration and long-term economic redevelopment following Hurricane Helene.

A native North Carolinian, Sharon has built her life and career around one central mission — strengthening the communities she loves. Her work focuses on rebuilding opportunity, fostering collaboration, and ensuring that individuals and businesses across Western North Carolina not only recover but thrive.

After a successful 17-year career with Duke Energy, Sharon began a new chapter in entrepreneurial leadership in both nonprofit and private organizations, including founding the Lynnwood Foundation in Charlotte and leading Doncaster, the women's apparel company. She later served as North Carolina's

Secretary of Commerce, where she led the creation of the Economic Development Partnership of North Carolina (EDPNC), helping to modernize and reposition the state's approach to job growth and investment. She went on to become President of Tryon International, leading the development of one of North Carolina's premier sports, tourism, and entertainment destinations.

Through her nonprofit, Tapestry Collaborative, Sharon continues her lifelong commitment to community and economic development, helping connect local leaders and for-profit, nonprofit, and public organizations in the shared work of restoring Western North Carolina's economy and spirit. Sharon lives in the foothills of Western North Carolina with her husband, Bob, and remains grounded in faith, family, and her belief that when communities come together with purpose, true restoration happens — for both people and place.

Class 33 Environment Session Planning Committee

The following members of LNC Class 32 make up the planning committee for the Class 33 Environment session.

Eric Bowen *Wake*

Director - Software and Data Engineering
North Carolina's Electric Cooperatives
eric.bowen@ncemcs.com

Eric Bowen was born and raised in Columbus, Ohio, where the strong sense of family and rich community shaped his early years. He earned two bachelor's degrees from Bowling Green State University, followed by a master's degree from American University. Over the past 20 years, he gained extensive experience in Software Development, Data Architecture, and Data Analytics which helped him grow into his current role as Director of Software and Data Engineering at a utility company in Raleigh, NC.

He currently resides in Wake Forest, North Carolina, with his amazing wife and two children. In his spare time, he finds his outlet through running (usually on the Greenway), and occasionally swimming. He also enjoys cooking for friends and grilling out on weekends.

Layla Cummings *Wake*

Director, Regulatory Affairs - NC
Duke Energy
layla.cummings@duke-energy.com

Layla Cummings is the Director of Regulatory Affairs – NC for Duke Energy and its 3.7 million customer North Carolina service territories. In this role, she supports Duke Energy Carolinas and Duke Energy Progress by leading a team that manages the utilities' NC regulatory matters and works with various local and state regulatory stakeholders regarding the provision of safe, reliable, and affordable electric power while achieving the State's transition to an increasingly clean energy economy.

Though not currently practicing law, Layla is a licensed attorney and member of the North Carolina State Bar. Prior to joining Duke Energy, Layla has served in various roles in state government. She worked as a policy advisor at the Department of Environmental Quality, where she assisted the Environmental Management Commission in developing oil and gas rules and a wind permitting program. She then served at the General Assembly as a staff attorney for the Legislative Analysis Division and was committee counsel to the House Energy and Public Utilities Committee where she helped facilitate the Energy Stakeholder process that led to the passage of landmark renewable energy legislation. Layla was also a staff attorney for the Public Staff, a state agency that protects the interests of the using and consuming public. At the Public Staff, Layla worked on the implementation of renewable energy programs and policies, grid modernization, and electric transportation issues, among other issues while protecting ratepayers' interest.

Layla is an alumna of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill where she earned her B.S. in Biology and her J.D. in 2012.

Tracey du Laney Wake

Vice President, Science and Technology Development
North Carolina Biotechnology Center
tracey_dulaney@ncbiotech.org

Tracey du Laney, Ph.D., is Vice President, Science and Technology Development at the North Carolina Biotechnology Center. As VP, she is responsible for managing and administering NCBiotech's research grant funding programs that are designed to advance promising scientific discoveries and technologies developed in N.C. colleges, universities, and nonprofit institutions towards commercialization. Within NCBiotech, Tracey works closely with the Economic Development and Emerging Company Development Units to advance the life sciences ecosystem and grow the economy of North Carolina. Her contributions to NCBiotech also include co-leading Science Club, a monthly lunch-time discussion group focused on the fun of science and general interest in scientific advances.

In 2019, Dr. du Laney was named an AAAS Alan I. Leshner Leadership Institute Public Engagement Fellow, with a focus on human augmentation. Tracey holds a Ph.D. in Biochemical Engineering from Duke University and was a postdoctoral fellow in cardiology at the University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill. Prior to joining NCBiotech, she was a partner and co-founder of an independent life sciences consulting firm, specializing in life sciences start-up company formation, strategic planning, entrepreneurship, investor due diligence, business grant writing, business plan writing and review, and life sciences markets and competitor analysis.

DeDreana Freeman, Co-Chair *Durham*

Principal Manager
DEEP LLC
equitableequality@gmail.com

DeDreana Freeman has been a bold and consistent advocate for justice. Former two-term City Council Member and former candidate for State Senate with a proven record of advancing social, economic, and environmental equity, Freeman brings both the leadership experience and lived perspective needed to build a more inclusive future.

A nonprofit leader, policy strategist, and seasoned consultant, DeDreana is the Principal of Developing Equitable Economic Partnerships (DEEP), LLC, where she advises nonprofit organizations and small businesses, and supports state and local government initiatives. She also previously served as Director of Partnership Development at CornerSquare Community Capital, where she helped Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFIs) and Minority Depository Institutions (MDIs) across 17 states increase investments from \$2.4 million to \$24 million in one year.

Earlier in her career, she held executive leadership roles at the Durham Children's Initiative, served as a Transportation Coordinator with Clean Energy Durham, and worked as a Business Analyst on NC Medicaid Bill XI with Electronic Data Systems, a Hewlett-Packard (HP) Enterprise company.

DeDreana is an alumna of Rutgers University and North Carolina Central University, where she earned a Master of Public Administration. Her lived experience navigating childhood trauma and systemic inequity fuels her commitment to challenging the status quo. A mother of three, a wife, and a

community-based leader, DeDreana centers the voices of those too often left out of decision-making and translates advocacy into meaningful policy change.

Esteban Guzmán *Wayne*
Director, Small Business Center
Wayne Community College
eguzman@waynecc.edu

Esteban Guzmán is the Director at the Small Business Center at Wayne Community College. Prior to stepping into his current role, Esteban Guzmán spent decades helping others find creative, yet simple solutions to entrepreneurial challenges and cross-border legal complexities. As a business owner and professional, in both Mexico and the USA, Esteban Guzmán has helped his clients plan, start and grow successful enterprises in the USA and Mexico.

Esteban Guzmán earned his Legum Baccalaureate (LLB) from the Universidad Autónoma de Baja California (UABC), a Master's degree in International Corporate Law from la Universidad Autónoma de Guadalajara (UAG), and a Master of Law in Comparative Laws from the California Western School of Law. He is a member of the North Carolina State Bar holding one of only two licenses as a Foreign Legal Consultant, and he is currently enrolled in the North Carolina Certified Economic Developer Program at East Carolina University.

Esteban Guzmán has taught as an adjunct law professor at several universities in Mexico for over a decade, teaching several courses from Law Philosophy to International Legal Systems. Esteban Guzmán combines his passion for business, law, and teaching by working with his clients as a mentor to help them achieve their dreams and thrive as successful entrepreneurs. He is a member of the Governor's Advisory Council on Latino Affairs and also serves as Vice President at RedGlobal MX, Capítulo Raleigh, Vice President at The Wayne County Latino Board, Board Member for the Wayne County Public Library, member of the Economic Vitality Committee at the Downtown Goldsboro Development Corporation, member of the minority business Committee of the Wayne County Chamber of Commerce, member of GoGlobal NC, Hispanic League PyMEs Committee member and served as board member of the Goldsboro Strike Eagles Football Club.

He believes that ability is forged as an alloy of knowledge, wisdom, understanding, perseverance, and imagination tempered by experience.

Jenn Heiss Wake
Deputy Marketing and Communications Director
NC Department of Transportation
jmgarifo@gmail.com

Jennifer "Jenn" Heiss is the Deputy Marketing and Communications Director with the NC Department of Transportation. Her team is tasked with informing North Carolinians about transportation-related projects, closures, and other items to ensure safety on our state's roadways and transportation networks.

Jenn was born in Washington, DC, and was raised in Lexington, NC. She received her bachelor's degree in communication, public relations from Appalachian State University and her master's degree in digital communication from UNC Chapel Hill. Coming from a line of public servants, Jenn has devoted her career to sharing the stories of work taking place in North Carolina, for North Carolinians. Her career in public service communications includes roles in state and local government, the electric utility industry, and NC State University.

Jenn served on the board of the NC Association of Government Information Officers for several years and is a current member of the NC Chapter of the Public Relations Society of America. In recent years, she has developed a passion for personal finance and helping fellow government employees make the best decisions for their unique financial needs. Living in Lexington for eight years taught Jenn that the right type of NC BBQ is pork shoulder, but she won't say no to a good plate of food. Jenn and her husband live in Raleigh.

Michael Johnson *Durham*

Senior Vice President

Dogwood State Bank

majohnson@dogwoodstate.bank

Michael Johnson's journey through the dynamic world of Financial Services, spanning over three decades, reflects a profound dedication to empowering small businesses and fostering financial acumen. His personal story, from the beginnings in Flint, MI, to the vibrant streets of New York City and Chicago, and finally settling in the charming Raleigh-Durham area, paints a picture of a life rich with experience and growth.

His aspiration to witness the grandeur of all four grand slam tennis events within a year showcases his zest for life and love for the sport. Michael's academic achievements, with an MBA from Northwestern and a bachelor's from Western Michigan, further underscore his commitment to excellence. His global travels, alongside the joys of family life, complete the portrait of a man who not only excels professionally but also cherishes every moment of his personal journey.

Jodi Kaplan *Mecklenburg*

Associate Vice Chancellor, Alumni Engagement

The University of North Carolina at Charlotte

jodi.kaplan@charlotte.edu

Jodi Kaplan is a native New Englander, born and raised in Connecticut. As a new North Carolinian, her eyes are open to new experiences, new dialects, and new geography (thanks GPS). She has enjoyed putting down the snow shovel and experiencing outdoor activities 12 months a year! Hiking, biking, and golfing are her hobbies of choice in her new warm-weather setting.

On the professional side, Jodi has committed more than three decades to her career in public higher education, specifically in University Advancement. She proudly served her alma mater, University of Massachusetts, early in her career. The bulk of her time was spent at the University of Connecticut. An amazing opportunity at UNC Charlotte brought this northerner south. It was the right job, in the right

place, at the right time for her and her family. Moving to UNC Charlotte was the biggest professional risk of her career, and it has also proven to be the most rewarding experience.

Leslie Karkanawi *Wake*

Chief Education Program Officer & General Counsel
North Carolina State Education Assistance Authority
lkarkanawi@ncseaa.edu

Leslie Karkanawi joined the North Carolina State Education Assistance Authority (NCSEAA) in August 2021 as the Director of Legal & Regulatory Affairs and General Counsel. As of July 1, 2025, she also became the Chief Education Program Officer for NCSEAA, overseeing its Higher Education and K12 Program Divisions. Prior to joining NCSEAA, Leslie served as a Principal Staff Attorney for the Legislative Drafting Division of the NC General Assembly, working primarily in the areas of education and workforce development for almost 10 years. She also served as the Education Appropriations Team Leader for the State Budget for that division. Prior to her role at the NC General Assembly, Leslie worked at the North Carolina School Boards Association and the UNC School of Government, Daily Bulletin. Before becoming an attorney, she also managed and performed research in a cardiovascular pathology laboratory at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Leslie received her undergraduate degree from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and her juris doctor from Northeastern University School of Law in Boston, MA. Leslie has certainly enjoyed over 17 years of living and working in North Carolina, but still holds dear her love of the Boston Red Sox, Bruins, and Patriots. She has resigned herself to also cheering for the Durham Bulls and the Hurricanes (of course, it helps they were the Whalers) when they are playing anyone else but Boston area teams. Leslie also has a passion for helping animals and working with local rescue organizations in her spare time.

Chris Rivera *Mecklenburg*

EMD Division Director, Department of Community Resources
Mecklenburg County
chris.rivera@mecklenburgcountync.gov

Chris Rivera serves as the Economic Mobility Division Director for Mecklenburg County's Department of Community Resources. In this role, he leads workforce development and upward mobility strategies that align talent, training, and supportive services to expand economic opportunity for residents across the county.

With more than 15 years of experience in workforce development, Chris has built a career centered on aligning education with labor market demand and advancing equitable access to opportunity. Prior to joining Mecklenburg County, he served as Vice President of Business & Workforce Solutions at South Piedmont Community College, where he led industry-aligned training initiatives, expanded apprenticeship partnerships, increased enrollment and completion outcomes, and strengthened cross-sector collaborations with employers, nonprofits, and public agencies. Chris is widely recognized for his systems-thinking approach, data-informed leadership, and ability to convene diverse stakeholders around shared goals. His work focuses on building integrated talent pipelines, removing structural barriers to employment, and designing workforce strategies that drive long-term economic mobility for historically underserved communities.

A proud graduate of Leadership North Carolina and current Program Chair, Chris remains deeply committed to cultivating cross-sector leadership and advancing policies and partnerships that strengthen North Carolina's economic future. He is passionate about ensuring that economic mobility is not aspirational, but attainable, measurable, and sustainable for all residents.

Stacy Sereno *Wake*

State Legislative Director and Legislative Counsel
North Carolina Farm Bureau
stacy.sereno@ncfb.org

Stacy Sereno is the State Legislative Director & Legislative Counsel for the North Carolina Farm Bureau Federation. She focuses primarily on NCFB's advocacy efforts at the North Carolina General Assembly.

Stacy received her BS in Agricultural Education from the University of Florida and her law degree from the University of Alabama School of Law. Her experience includes working as Policy Advisor for the South Dakota Department of Agriculture, Special Assistant to the Administrator at USDA's Risk Management Agency, and Professional Staff at the US House of Representatives Committee on Agriculture, where she was responsible for the Agricultural Research and Horticulture titles of the 2018 Farm Bill.

Stacy grew up on a family farm in central Florida and was active in showing dairy and beef cattle. She also served as the 2002-2003 Florida FFA State President. She currently lives in Raleigh with her husband, Alex, and their twins, Maisie and Michael.

Emily Wallace, Co-Chair *Wake*

Managing Principal
Thrivner, Inc.
emily@thrivner.com

Emily Wallace is the Managing Principal of Thrivner, Inc., a woman-owned small business providing science and technology consulting services and productivity products. She has delivered extraordinary results to Federal and state governments, non-profit organizations, academic institutions, and for-profit companies on assignments as varied as starting a new grant program, prioritizing scientific research, and assessing climate science. She has more than 20 years' experience in strategy, facilitation, and whole-of-society collaboration.

With a Bachelor of Science in marine science from the University of South Carolina, she gravitated to science and technology policy and Washington, DC. After working in the House and Senate, she departed Capitol Hill for the American Geosciences Institute (AGI). Tracking legislation, meeting with Members of Congress and their staff, and teaching fellow scientists the ins and outs of Capitol Hill remains a professional highlight.

Emily's for-profit company, Thrivner, will celebrate 18 years of accomplishments this year, including Thrivner Planner, which boasts a 4.8 rating in the Apple App Store. In 2020, Apricity (non-profit), was founded to shine a light on challenges and solutions that cross all issues and systems: social,

technological, economic, environmental, political, and health.

When she's not at work, you can find her volunteering for Schoolhouse of Wonder (a Triangle non-profit that gets kids outside into the forest for day camp), wrangling other volunteers for the neighborhood swim team (Go Hammerheads!), loitering at the ice rink waiting for hockey practice to end, hiking with the Cub Scouts, or walking her dog, Tessie.