

# ONE GASTON CONNECTS

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If Gaston County's residents are to thrive, they must be able to safely and reliably access jobs, educational opportunities, and quality of life essentials and amenities.

Data show the majority of Gaston County's workers (82% according to the most recent Census estimates) commute to work via car, truck, or van. Additionally, highway access is a key consideration for many businesses, particularly those in sectors such as manufacturing for which Gaston County is highly competitive. As the Interstate 85 corridor west and south of Charlotte continues to grow, Gaston County respondents said that road and highway infrastructure must keep pace.

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OF GASTON COUNTY  
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Helping to guide local policy and prioritize infrastructure maintenance and development is the Comprehensive Transportation Plan (CTP). The plan was developed for Gaston, Cleveland, and Lincoln counties by the Gaston-Cleveland-Lincoln Metropolitan Planning Organization (GCLMPO), local counties, towns, and the North Carolina Department of Transportation's (NCDOT) Transportation Planning Branch. The CTP is a long-range planning document assisting local government and its representatives in making transportation decisions over the next 30-plus years. The most recent CTP was adopted by the state in March 2017 and is reprioritized every two years through the development of a Transportation Improvement Program (TIP).

Beyond the continued improvement of auto-based infrastructure, community members would also like to see expanded transportation options. Specifically, residents said improved public transportation options and better infrastructure for active transportation modes such as walking and biking are needed. This is consistent with broader trends. Communities around the country have recognized the importance of transit and active transportation in supporting a wide range of community goals such as equity and public health. Additionally, many businesses are now placing a premium on walkable and transit-accessible locations because of their appeal to talent.

Another mode of connectivity is digital connectivity. Awareness of broadband availability and financial constraints are the primary challenges to Gaston residents' access to broadband internet. In the post-pandemic world, digital access is increasingly vital for a thriving community.

# ONE GASTON CONNECTS OBJECTIVE 1: IMPROVE MOBILITY, CONNECTIVITY, AND ACCESSIBILITY

The first of this Focus Area’s two objectives – Mobility, Connectivity, and Accessibility – addresses how Gaston County’s residents get around. During the public input process, traffic, road, and highway infrastructure emerged as major themes.

During the public input process, community members discussed numerous ways in which mobility, connectivity, and accessibility can be enhanced to benefit Gaston County’s residents and businesses. These issues can be grouped into three broad categories, each of which corresponds to a strategy within this objective. The first concerns connectivity to the core of the Charlotte region. Stakeholders identified two key investments – the Wilkinson Boulevard Bridge replacement and the proposed Catawba Crossings project – to enhance connectivity across the Catawba River into Mecklenburg County and Charlotte. Additionally, the planned LYNX Silver Line light rail project presents Gaston County with special opportunities to enhance transit connectivity to the Charlotte region and foster transit-oriented development around the proposed station in Belmont.

In 2019, the LYNX Silver Line was approved as a single 26-mile light rail corridor from Matthews, through Uptown Charlotte, extending westward to the airport and terminating in Gaston County. During this time, the Charlotte City Council also approved funds to enter the project into pre-project development. The following image shows the corridor alignment and its western terminus in Gaston County.



Source: Charlotte Area Transit System Transit Vision: 2030 Transit Corridor System Plan

The second strategy focuses on improving roads, highways, and transit within Gaston County while the third addresses potential options to enhance the safety, convenience, and desirability of utilizing active transportation modes, namely walking and biking.



## GASTON CONNECTS Strategy 1.1: Strengthen transportation links to Charlotte and the rest of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg region.

Ensuring that Gaston County residents are aware of the benefits of major regional connectivity projects will help increase public support for those projects when needed. The GCLMPO can take the lead working with government partners at all levels to advance the Wilkinson Boulevard Bridge project, Catawba Crossings project, LYNX Silver Line project, and similar projects. Broad based support can ultimately determine the fate of any of these projects.

There will be opportunities embedded within any of these connectivity projects to plan for types of development that will enhance Gaston County. The Belmont LYNX station will be an especially important opportunity for mixed-use, transit-oriented development (TOD); the Charlotte Area Transit System (CATS) Station Area Typologies Manual might guide infrastructure improvements and land use planning. The station should be accessible via multiple types of transportation (walking, biking, driving, transit).



## GASTON CONNECTS Strategy 1.2: Improve local mobility through new and expanded roads, highways, and intra-county public transportation.

Gaston County residents are very aware that getting from one corner of the County to another can be challenging. In some cases, roadways and public transportation are insufficient to enable people to get around and reach important destinations. For example, many residents who might benefit from participating in classes at Gaston College are unable to access those classes due to lack of public transportation to the campus.

It will be important for Gaston County to continue to advance funded road and highway improvements and ensure high priority transportation projects in Gaston County are included in North Carolina's State Transportation Improvement Program plans.

In the arena of public transportation, the County can evaluate expanding both the model of providing rides on a predetermined route according to a predetermined schedule and the model of demand-response transit which might address residents' needs more flexibly.

## GASTON CONNECTS Strategy 1.3: Enhance access to safe walking and biking areas, including sidewalks and bike lanes.

The regional transportation planning agency can ensure that sidewalks, bike lanes, and paths are included in their plan and prioritized for funding. Going one step further, some communities develop a stand-alone Active Transportation Plan to create a connected, accessible system of bicycle, pedestrian, and vehicle infrastructure across Gaston County cities, towns, and unincorporated areas. The Daniel Morgan Trail System, in Spartanburg, is one example.



## ONE GASTON CONNECTS OBJECTIVE 2: ENABLE BROADBAND INTERNET ACCESS

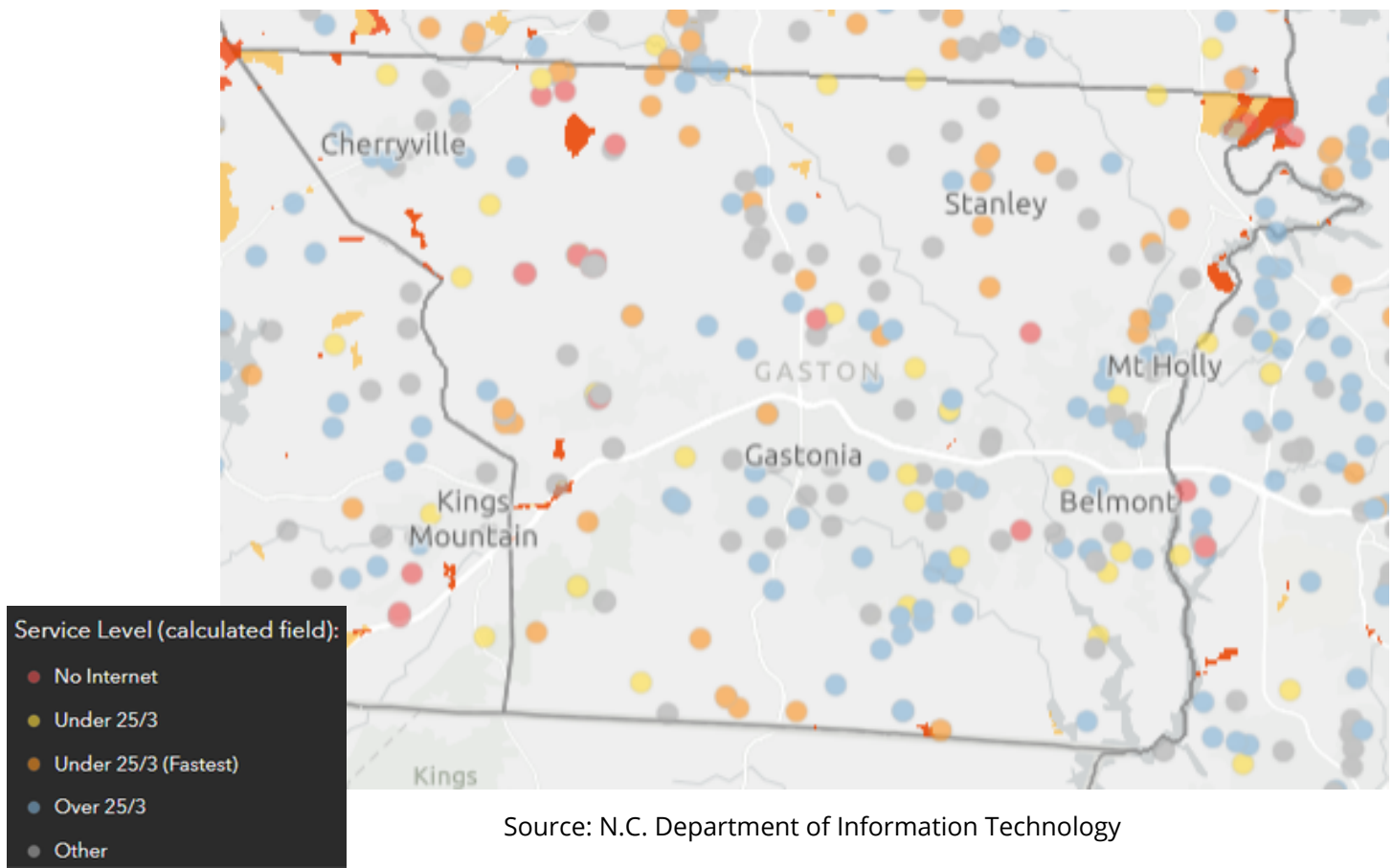
Community members said that many families in Gaston County struggled with remote work and virtual school during the pandemic. The community members also expressed a strong desire to see the community address digital equity gaps by helping more households access the internet. In the post-pandemic world, broadband internet is a necessity.

Per the North Carolina Department of Information Technology, virtually all residents in Gaston County (99.79%) had access to fast internet as of 2019. But just 66.5% of households had a high-speed subscription, and only 32% of the population lived in a location with underground high-speed cables.

The following map from the NCDIT's NC Broadband Survey shows that neighborhoods lacking broadband access or with insufficient speeds are scattered throughout the county, mostly in more rural areas.

IN 2019, ONLY  
**32%**  
OF THE GASTON COUNTY  
POPULATION LIVED  
IN A LOCATION WITH  
UNDERGROUND  
HIGH-SPEED  
CABLES.

**BROADBAND INTERNET SERVICE LEVEL, GASTON COUNTY, 2020**



The finding that over one third of Gaston County households cannot afford high speed internet is consistent with a theme from the input process. Stakeholders said that Gaston County suffers from a digital equity gap, where lower income residents have limited or no high speed internet service, meaning they have less ability to access employment, education opportunities, and many other online services.

Fortunately, high speed broadband internet infrastructure and digital equity are now priority issues at both the state and national levels. North Carolina has created the Growing Rural Economies with Access to Technology (GREAT) Program to enhance high speed internet access in underserved areas. In July 2022, Gaston County was awarded a GREAT grant to bring broadband to nearly 180 homes and businesses.

Recent federal legislation has also made available significant funds to upgrade high speed internet infrastructure and increase access for low income households. A particularly promising initiative is the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP), which gives low income households a benefit of up to \$30 per month to help households access affordable high speed internet services. Stakeholders in Gaston County can leverage these programs to work toward closing the digital divide.

### GASTON CONNECTS Strategy 2.1: Seek funding to upgrade infrastructure and speeds.

Gaston County should continue to seek GREAT grants and other state monies to expand infrastructure to remaining households and businesses in eligible areas of Gaston County that still lack high speed broadband internet access.

The County can also work with private telecommunications providers to explore opportunities to expand high speed infrastructure to underserved neighborhoods.

### GASTON CONNECTS Strategy 2.2: Assist low-income households with broadband internet access.

It is vital to increase awareness of the Affordable Connectivity Program opportunities using traditional and outdoor media, digital advertising, social media, radio, word-of-mouth marketing, and perhaps by conducting one or more ACP enrollment drives, meeting people where they are at schools, places of worship, sporting events, and other community functions.