



ONE GASTON GROWS

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and economic success by
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According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Gaston County added nearly 22,000 new residents between 2010 and 2020. This represents a growth rate of 10.6%, which exceeded both the state and national averages. Percentage wise, it was also Gaston County's strongest decade for population growth since the 1960s.

It is notable that the bulk of the community's growth between 2010 and 2019 was driven by net domestic migration; more people moved into Gaston County from other parts of the United States than moved out. During this time period, the Census Bureau estimates domestic migration accounted for nearly four out of five new residents in Gaston County. The remaining 20 percent can be attributed to natural change (local births exceeding local deaths) and a relatively small amount of net in-migration from other countries.



02920 Gastonia, N. C.
Residential Street Scene.



Population growth and strong domestic in-migration are not by themselves indicators of community strength. But these figures are consistent with a trend that emerged from public input: Gaston County for many reasons remains a specific, desirable destination within the larger, desirable destination, which is the Charlotte region. Community input also revealed that Gaston County's growth-related opportunities and challenges are evolving as the community continues to attract talent and investment.

The most recent Gaston County Comprehensive Plan, approved in 2016 by the County Commissioners, sought to address the changing dynamics and projected population growth the county will experience. The plan found that historical development in Gaston County largely focused on access to the Catawba River, initially for industry and commerce, but more recently for connectivity to Charlotte-Mecklenburg. Most development has thus occurred in East Gaston and along the I-85 corridor. Growth also concentrated around municipalities – many of which were former mill towns – because there was infrastructure to accommodate new development. To inform prescribed future land uses, the comprehensive plan prioritized transportation infrastructure and availability of water and sewer service as key growth criteria.

A critical component of future land use projections is housing, which was also the most prominent issue to emerge from One Gaston 2040 public input. At the national level, housing has become a top concern for many communities in recent years, although many challenges and potential policy solutions remain outside of local control or influence. Nevertheless, Gaston County respondents said the community should – to the extent possible – seek to address issues of housing availability and affordability while helping residents remain in their homes and communities.

ONE GASTON GROWS OBJECTIVE 1: MAXIMIZE HOUSING OPTIONS

While conditions vary from market to market, housing development in the United States has not kept pace with population growth and demographic trends. These long-term issues have been worse in recent years due to price spikes in housing products, labor and supply chain shortages, and rising interest rates.

In Gaston County, data show that the local housing market is still affordable compared to peer communities, the state, and nation. However, home values in Gaston County have risen faster than North Carolina and the U.S. and residents are concerned they could be priced out of the market.

HOUSING VALUE, 2010-2020

Geography	Median Owner-Occupied Housing Unit Value			Home Affordability Ratio, 2020
	2010	2020	% chg.	
Gaston County	\$131,300	\$168,600	28.4%	3.15
Spartanburg County	\$127,800	\$165,800	29.7%	3.08
Sumner County	\$172,600	\$259,900	50.6%	3.72
Union County	\$201,400	\$268,300	33.2%	3.25
North Carolina	\$160,300	\$202,200	26.1%	3.57
United States	\$208,900	\$251,700	20.5%	3.87

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, BRS

Gaston County residents said they would like to see the community encourage and provide incentives for the development of a wide range of housing types for residents earning different levels of income. They also expressed concern about the ability of Gaston County residents to remain in their homes as gentrification (the transformation of a neighborhood from low value to high value) pressures increase in some parts of the community.

A 2021 report from an Intergovernmental and Interagency Task Force on Homelessness in Gaston County found that there are more families in need of emergency shelter in Gaston County than beds to house them. Task Force members also reported a lack of affordable and workforce housing for residents earning below the county's median income. Their clients are often unable to secure permanent housing even after receiving support services. The Task Force would like to see governments better coordinate their efforts to end homelessness and foster greater interagency communication and collaboration.

GASTON GROWS Strategy 1.1: Provide sufficient housing supply for residents at all income levels.

One example of a community that has been proactive in addressing their housing challenges is Lima, Ohio. The city established a Housing Task Force, whose members represent the community and whose voices have resonance, to develop approaches to key elements of their housing dilemma. Gaston County might consider a similar approach.

Since the Charlotte region is an economic development magnet, the County might leverage that development capacity to engage local, regional, and national developers to pursue opportunities to build new housing and neighborhood amenities in Gaston County.

GASTON GROWS Strategy 1.2: Support policies that prevent people from losing their homes as growth occurs.

Both the City of Gastonia and Gaston County have studied issues of homelessness and housing challenges and have made recommendations. One Gaston 2040 should carefully review their reports for direction.

In some cases, local governments can pursue policies that may help people keep their homes. These policies may include property tax relief for residents in areas where housing prices are rising quickly, inclusionary zoning (policies that use the economic gains from rising real estate values to create affordable housing), allowances for accessory dwelling units (backyard tiny houses, apartments over garages, etc.), and zoning that allows for duplex (two unit) and triplex (three unit) buildings where appropriate.



ONE GASTON GROWS OBJECTIVE 2: PROVIDE ADEQUATE INFRASTRUCTURE

While less visible in people's everyday lives than housing, growing communities must also address infrastructure issues. Because water and sewer lines are not extended beyond city limits, it will be important to determine the needs and opportunities for county wide water and sewer infrastructure.

Infrastructure is not a flashy topic compared to many other issues in community and economic development. They're just pipes in the ground, right? We take them for granted. But ensuring that a community has enough water, sewer, and utility capacity to meet its current and future needs is still fundamental to success. Businesses must be confident that local infrastructure can meet their everyday needs. Commercial and industrial building sites for new companies must also have access to roads, water and sewer pipes, fast internet, electricity, and railroads.

Infrastructure is an especially important consideration for a community like Gaston County looking to diversify its economy. Future demand needs to be met while older infrastructure must be maintained. Because infrastructure projects are typically expensive, a key ingredient for success is building broad-based public support for making the investments needed to ensure that the community's residents and businesses can prosper and thrive. Input participants lauded monthly meetings of municipal planners from Gaston County's many governments and would like to see these efforts continued and expanded going forward.

The Gaston County Comprehensive Plan also understood that high quality utility services were vital to retaining good employers and talent and attracting new residents. According to the plan, Gaston County recognizes the need for enhanced utilities, but also that location plays a large role in shaping future development. The County, therefore, strives to improve service, but in such a way to prevent sprawl.



GASTON GROWS Strategy 2.1: Invest in water, sewer, utilities capacity, and other foundational assets that help us grow.

Meetings that already occur regularly among municipal managers and municipal planners will be key to integrated planning and investment. It might be advantageous to conduct a feasibility study to assess countywide water and sewer infrastructure needs to inform future projects and investments.



ONE GASTON GROWS OBJECTIVE 3: RETAIN CHARACTER AND NATURAL AMENITIES

The Gaston County Comprehensive Plan concluded that the majority of Gaston County is rural in nature and should retain this character. The plan envisioned pockets of rural density developing where roads and utilities come together and future land use scenarios concentrate medium and high-density residential growth around existing Gaston County municipalities. These jurisdictions provide the water and sewer availability necessary to support these densities and housing styles.

Because a comprehensive plan focuses on anticipated development and land use, Gaston County's plan, approved by County Commissioners in 2016, speaks directly to this desire by recommending that quality of life be enhanced through focused growth of commercial and community resources, improved walkability, and agricultural preservation. To maintain Gaston's quality of life, the plan advocates for incorporated towns to expand resources in unincorporated areas to support the county's overall health and wellbeing. Per the plan, "this may include creating different types of neighborhoods to suit different residents, creating better quality communities instead of just increasing quantity, and leveraging the assets of the county to highlight the benefits of life in Gaston."

The preservation of rural and natural environments is consistent with feedback from One Gaston 2040 stakeholder input. Residents said they would like to see the community continue to leverage and invest in its historic downtowns and commercial districts, forests, parks, bike lanes, and playgrounds. They also want chances to participate in discussions about how the county grows.

GASTON GROWS Strategy 3.1: Grow with quality and character in downtowns and districts across the County.

All Gaston County cities and towns should establish or strengthen their downtown association or Main Street organization and work to hire professional staff for these initiatives. One successful example of this is Heart of Brevard (Brevard, NC).

Cities and towns might also want to consider the feasibility of establishing Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) that collect fees from businesses to beautify and maintain public areas in downtown districts. This approach is working currently in Downtown Improvement Districts in Cary, NC and Greensboro, NC.

Supporting locally owned businesses with entrepreneurial resources, and supporting the creation of housing options in downtowns are also viable options.

6—Main Street Looking West, Gastonia, N. C.



GASTON GROWS Strategy 3.2: Preserve and conserve natural resources and environments.

There may be opportunities to connect organizations dedicated to preserving natural areas (e.g., the Catawba Lands Conservancy) with landowners interested in private strategies to preserve natural assets. There may also be opportunities for governments to create mitigation programs that substitute land preservation for certain development fees or penalties.

GASTON GROWS Strategy 3.3: Ensure all residents have a voice in how Gaston grows.

Participants in the One Gaston 2040 engagement sessions expressed strong desires to be included in discussions and decisions about growth in the County. Making in-person engagement as convenient as possible, including scheduling meetings outside of business hours and in a variety of neighborhoods and types of meeting spaces, will help residents stay involved. There are innovative ways to bring residents into decisions. In Toronto, for example, a 32-member advisory body consisting of residents is selected through a randomized process called a Civic Lottery. This process helps ensure that the members of the panel represent the diversity of Toronto's population, while broadening engagement by bringing new voices into the planning process. The panel discusses and offers input toward planning decisions.

