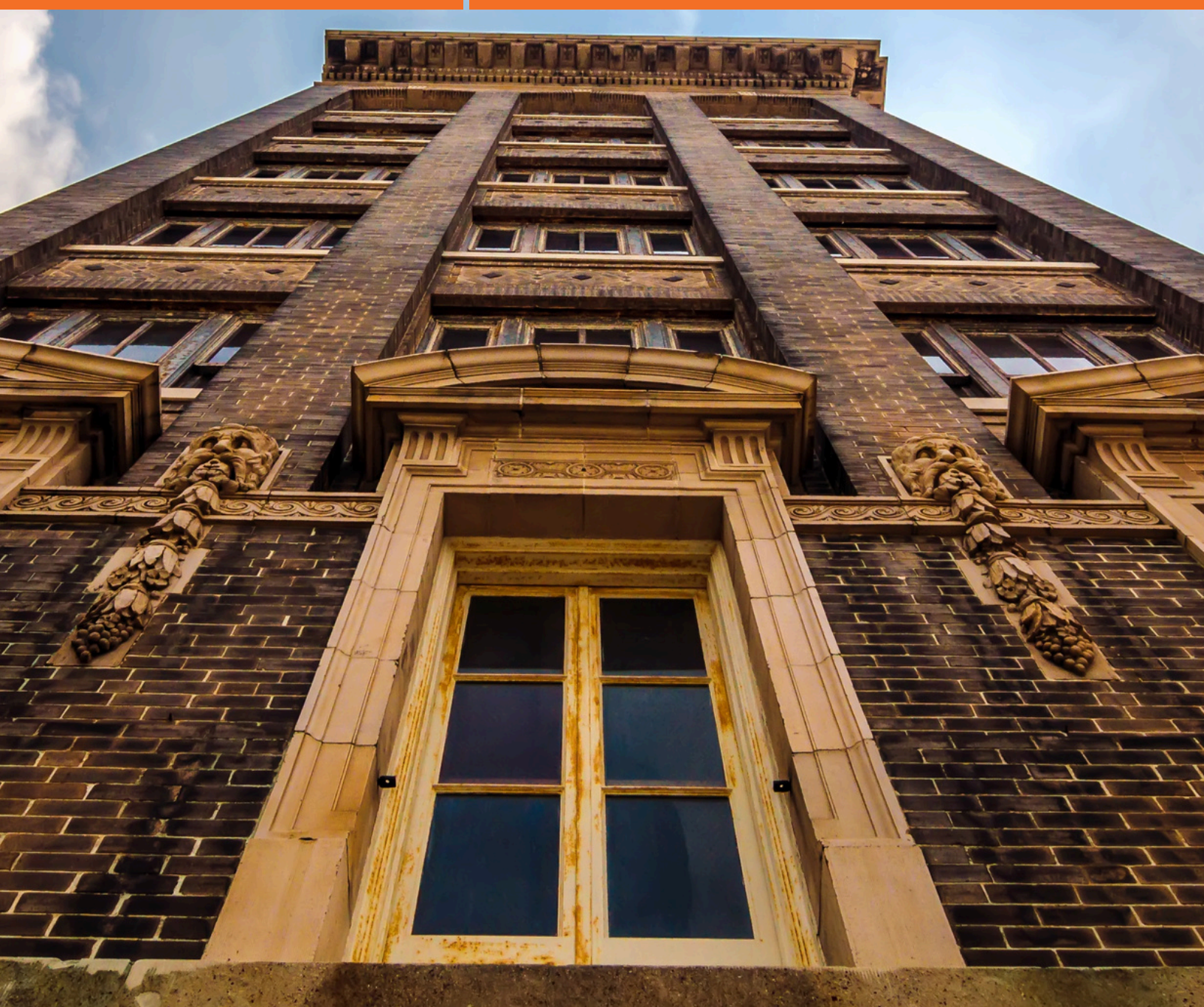


ONE GASTON CARES

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Gaston County residents expressed a clear desire for their community to be “a place where everyone thrives.”

In response to an online survey, one community member said:

“Our future hangs in the balance. Until we leverage the talents of all community members and raise each other up (without worrying about perceived personal losses), we'll continue to exist in the shadow of our surrounding communities and will fall farther behind in health, economic, mobility and other pertinent metrics. We need each other and depend on one another for our future success.”

Another asked,

“The equity divide is wide. How can we better serve those in need - from hunger to education to health and transportation? What needs are identified and how can business/non-profit community work together to ensure everyone has a future in Gaston County?”

This is a key question, and the one that drives the recommendations made as we focus on One Gaston Cares.

The 2021 Community Health Assessment (CHA) conducted for Gaston County paints a picture of the community’s key health needs and issues through data collection, analysis, and a quality of life survey. The CHA enables healthcare providers, policy makers, and community partners to work together around common challenges and solutions. Among the results of the CHA’s quality of life survey are rankings of what residents feel are the most important determinants of their health. As seen in the following chart, a range of issues affect these outcomes.

Ranking of Social Determinants of Health

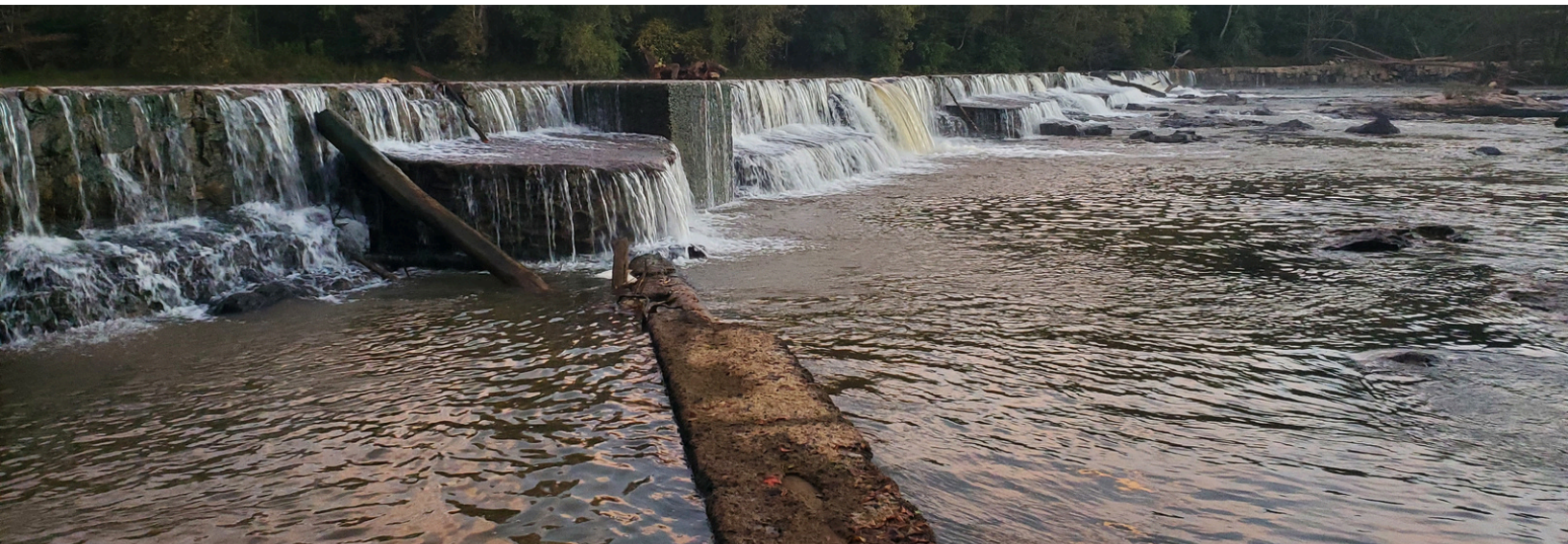
Ranked in order of importance, with 5 being the most important.



Source: Quality of Life Survey

In a community like Gaston County where multiple entities provide healthcare services, service coordination and easy, reliable access become key differentiating factors for resident health and wellness.

One Gaston Cares deals broadly with the well-being of Gaston County’s communities and residents. Each of its three objectives reflects a significant theme that emerged from the public input process.



GASTON CARES OBJECTIVE 1: COLLABORATE AND BUILD COALITIONS

Collaboration will be instrumental to successfully activate and achieve a plan as ambitious and comprehensive as One Gaston 2040. The input process uncovered a special need to work collaboratively across geographic lines for the betterment of Gaston County as a whole.

Gaston County has roughly 230,000 residents spread out over more than 360 square miles. In a place of this size, it is not surprising that many residents identify more closely with a smaller “community within a community” such as a municipality or neighborhood. But stakeholders said there are some divisions within Gaston County that warrant strategic attention.

Gaston County’s early growth was fueled by the cotton and textile industries, organized around mill villages that effectively functioned as independent economic, political, and social units. The old mills have long since ceased operations, but input participants said that a legacy of separateness persists. Some parts of Gaston County have rapidly suburbanized while others remain rural in character, and residents in some parts of the county feel left out of decision making and left behind by growth. The 14 municipalities in the County inspire pride in their residents, which sometimes can lead to comparisons that highlight disparities. Demographic and socioeconomic differences further complicate the challenges of coalescing around a shared vision.



GASTON CARES Strategy 1.1: Bring different segments of the county together to meet local challenges through continuing and new partnerships.

One Gaston 2040 can embody this spirit, by ensuring that all Gaston 2040 Work Teams include representatives drawn from throughout Gaston County. Vision leaders can also encourage public, private, and nonprofit leaders to value geographic and demographic diversity among their board memberships and planning initiatives.

Existing programs like Civic Engagement Leadership, that work across the community to create social capital and leadership capacity, can lend momentum to the effort.

In the course of efforts outlined in the One Gaston Shines Focus Area, great stories can be shared when coalition building and successful cross-county partnerships lead to successful outcomes and exemplary projects or initiatives.

GASTON CARES OBJECTIVE 2: WELCOME AND VALUE DIVERSITY

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) has been a major topic of conversation in the United States in recent years, even more so after the unequal impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic were understood. In addition to moral considerations, businesses have recognized the importance of DEI as they seek to attract and retain a competitive workforce. An emerging body of research shows that economically healthy communities tend to be open and inclusive.

Gaston County's diversity has actually increased due to its population growth patterns. The following table shows that Gaston County diversified faster than all its peer communities, North Carolina, and the U.S. from 2010 to 2020.

CHANGE IN RACE AND ETHNICITY, 2010-2020

| Race/Ethnicity | Gaston County | Spartanburg County | Sumner County | Union County | North Carolina | United States |
|-----------------------------------|---------------|--------------------|---------------|--------------|----------------|---------------|
| White, non-Hispanic | -9.4% | -5.4% | -8.5% | -7.8% | -5.6% | -6.8% |
| Black or African American | 2.7% | -1.0% | 1.3% | -0.4% | -1.0% | -0.2% |
| Hispanic or Latino | 3.2% | 3.1% | 3.0% | 2.8% | 2.9% | 3.0% |
| American Indian and Alaska Native | -0.1% | 0.1% | -0.1% | -0.1% | -0.1% | 0.0% |
| Asian | 0.3% | 0.5% | 0.5% | 2.6% | 1.2% | 1.3% |
| Other | 3.2% | 2.7% | 3.8% | 2.9% | 2.6% | 2.6% |

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



Because of its growth, these legacy issues are less pronounced in Gaston County than places where deep-seated divisions remain in place. Still, Gaston County faces challenges to bring together constituencies differentiated by race and ethnicity.

Diversity also includes gender, physical and mental abilities, socioeconomics, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, and other elements that influence who we are and how we live.

As Gaston County continues to grow and evolve, residents would like to proactively build connections and trust among the community's diverse populations, see diversity among community leaders, and welcome new residents from different backgrounds. One survey respondent said,

"I'd like to see Gaston County embrace equality and equity and make this a place where everyone feels safe and welcome."

Another said,

"Gaston County has the potential to be a great place, if we embrace the diversity that makes it wonderful."

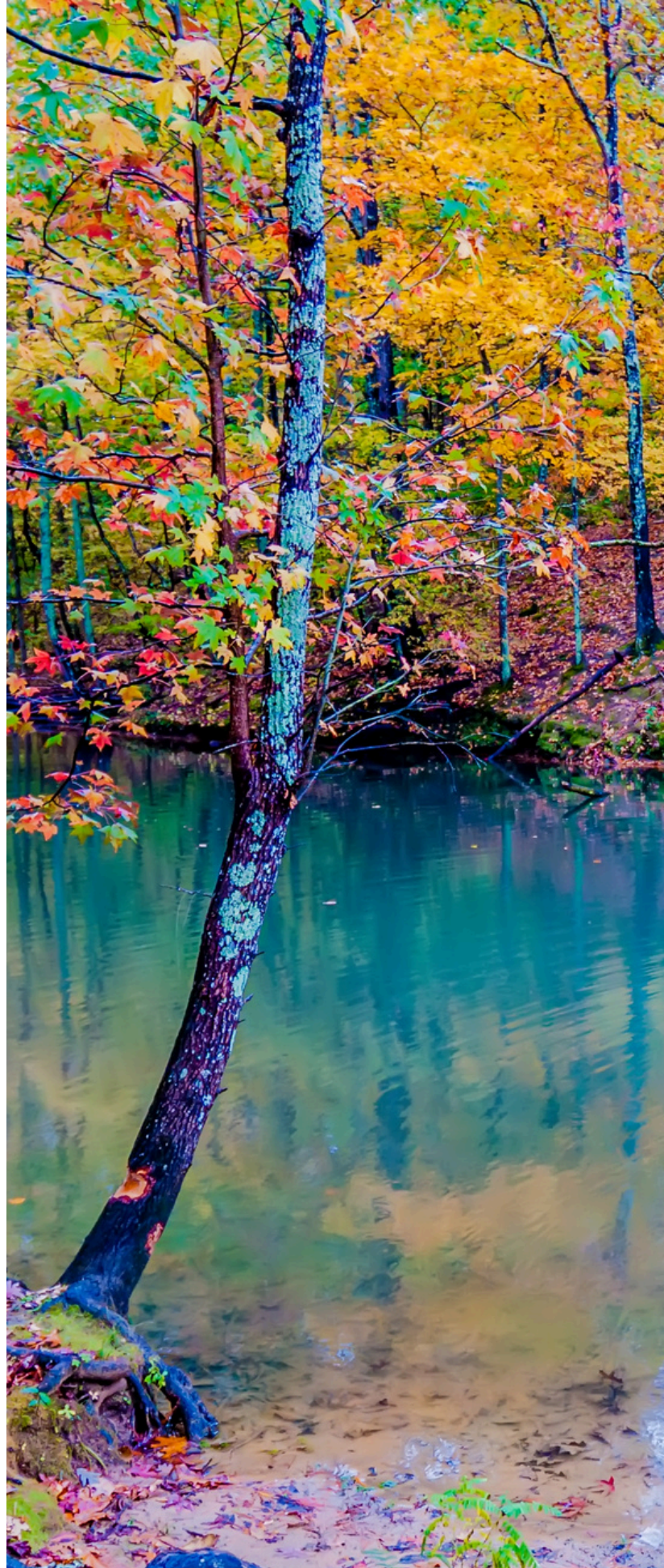


GASTON CARES Strategy 2.1: Foster conversations, connections, trust, and a new understanding of Gaston County's diversity by valuing diversity in leadership and culture.

One Gaston 2040 should encourage local organizations to increase board diversity based on factors such as age, race and ethnicity, etc. and leverage community groups and programs such as Leadership Gaston and Civic Engagement Leadership to identify emerging leaders who would be good candidates for board service.

There may be ideas to borrow from other communities. In Des Moines, Iowa, for example, the Greater Des Moines Partnership uses Multicultural Receptions to encourage dialogue among business and community leaders. Their website states, "Multicultural Receptions provide opportunities for those in the Greater Des Moines (DSM) community to develop new relationships with others who are passionate about building an inclusive community for the region."

Cultural events that celebrate Gaston County's diverse residents (e.g. Juneteenth, Hispanic Heritage Month, etc.) are already occurring and can be nurtured and duplicated.



GASTON CARES Strategy 2.2: Offer a clear welcome to new residents of all backgrounds to increase their sense of belonging and their ability to build successful lives in Gaston County.

New residents can enrich the local economy by building and supporting entrepreneurial and small businesses that serve diverse populations.

Some communities offer a civic engagement program to help new Americans (recent immigrants, refugees, etc.) learn about and participate in civic life. One example is the Civic Pathways initiative in Metro Atlanta.

Gaston County might build on the YMCA Welcoming Week, which the Y offers as a chance for neighbors to get to know one another and celebrate what unites us as a community. Other organizations could join in or create their own welcoming effort that brings people together. In Coachella Valley, California, for example, a New Business and Resident Welcome Reception occurs every year.

Aside from annual events, some communities create a capacity for ongoing engagement with new residents. The Ask A Local initiative in Omaha, Nebraska, provides a website where residents from various cultural, affinity, and interest groups are available to provide insights to interested newcomers or prospective residents.



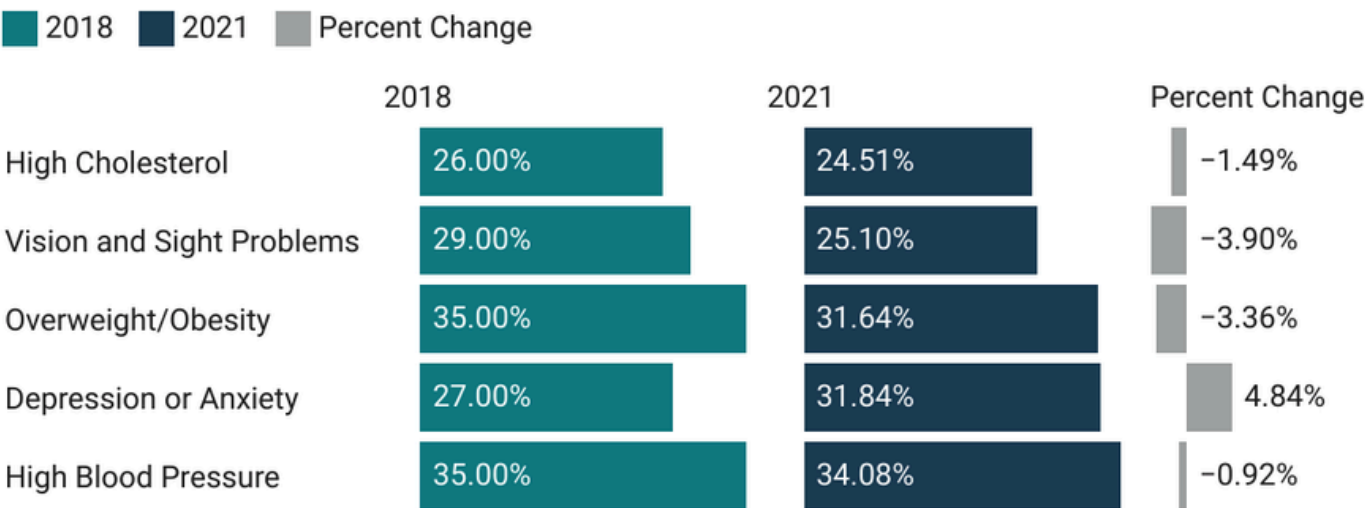
GASTON CARES OBJECTIVE 3: PROMOTE HEALTH AND WELLNESS

According to rankings published by the University of Wisconsin’s Population Health Institute, 21% of Gaston County adults were in fair or poor health in 2021. This was elevated compared to the North Carolina average (18%) and significantly worse than the nation’s top performing counties (14% or less). Additionally, the rankings show that Gaston County residents reported more mentally unhealthy days on an age-adjusted basis than the state average.

The quality of life survey from the 2021 Gaston Community Health Assessment offers further perspective with responses to a question about changes in disease prevalence between 2018 and 2021. High blood pressure remains the most common disease, but depression or anxiety was the only category to increase during this three-year period, likely strongly influenced by the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the local population.

Quality of Life Survey - Disease Incidence

2018 & 2021 Top 5 Diagnosis Comparison



Source: Gaston County Quality of Life Survey

Based on the findings of the CHA, CaroMont Health, and the Gaston County Health Department, along with other healthcare and community partners, developed a Community Health Improvement Plan (CHIP) for implementation in 2023 and beyond. A CHIP is a long-term, systematic effort to address population health problems through community health improvement processes and partnerships.

GASTON CARES Strategy 3.1: Implement community wide programs to improve local population health and wellness outcomes.

The Community Health Improvement Plan is updated regularly based on the most recent Community Health Assessment. Assuring that coordination occurs when developing and implementing the plan will be key to its success. Alignment of efforts and creative sharing of resources without duplication will allow Gaston County to advance farther, faster.

GASTON CARES Strategy 3.2: Improve accessibility of public health and mental health programs and residents' awareness of care services.

During engagement workshops for One Gaston 2040, many residents talked about access to and availability of health services, especially for those who need mental health support. These issues are intertwined with issues of substance abuse, homelessness, and housing insecurity. Mental health care providers and other partners can ensure that issues of mental health and self-care are represented in awareness-building efforts and program design.





GASTON CARES Strategy 3.3: Provide access to healthy food for underserved neighborhoods.

Parts of Gaston County qualify as food deserts, defined as areas where it is difficult to buy affordable or good-quality fresh food. The most direct strategy is to encourage permanent grocery stores, food co-ops, or delivery services in food deserts, but this can be challenging due to market forces.

Some communities have developed creative, if not permanent solutions. In some places, pop-up food stands sell fresh, healthy food in high-traffic locations. One example, in Atlanta, is called MARTA Markets.

Spartanburg, South Carolina, has created a mobile market extension of a local farmer's market or food cooperative to complement these pop-up food stands. The Spartanburg program is called Hub City Farmers Market Mobile Market.

The United States Department of Agriculture and/or private nonprofit firms such as the Food Co-Op Initiative can help assess the feasibility of developing a non-profit cooperative to sell healthy produce to local residents.