

ONE GASTON SHINES

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How residents think and talk about a place can have an important impact on its prosperity and success. When residents share positive views about the place they live, they can boost the pride and morale of their friends, families, and neighbors. Sharing these positive opinions with non-residents can also make a significant impact, as some of these individuals may be prospective residents, employers, or investors. Pride can also take the form of how a community “shines” through public art and how it embraces arts and culture to help tell its story.

The community is proud of Gaston County’s natural attractions and assets, parks, downtowns, and restaurants and value the community’s people, family-friendly activities, and development of amenities afforded by growth.

WHAT MAKES GASTON COUNTY A GOOD PLACE TO VISIT?



Source: One Gaston 2040 Online Survey

Gaston County is certainly not alone in facing these issues. Many communities around the country have contended with challenges such as limited resident engagement, lack of pride, and historical community tensions. It must be acknowledged that addressing these challenges can be difficult.

At the end of the day, resident perceptions are strongly impacted by their personal experiences. That is, people are responsive to visible progress on issues that impact their lives like economic growth, new development, enhanced quality of life amenities, and so on. The enhancement of benefits like these in recent years is likely the reason that resident attitudes have improved. Successfully activating One Gaston 2040 can be instrumental in continuing this momentum to further increase community pride and awareness of Gaston County’s strengths and opportunities.

ONE GASTON SHINES OBJECTIVE 1: GENERATE PRIDE AND POSITIVE PERCEPTIONS

Opportunities to boost residents' perceptions of Gaston County can not only improve their outlook on the community as a place to live and work, but also create thousands of new advocates to influence talent or companies looking for a place to plant roots. The fact that Gaston County has so much going for it and such a bright future makes the job of improving resident attitudes much easier. This work could also entail more intentional ways of encouraging Gaston County stakeholders to be marketers on behalf of their community, including opportunities to influence information and perceptions about the county in social media.

GASTON SHINES Strategy 1.1: Craft and communicate positive stories that honor our past, imagine our future, and help citizens brag about Gaston County.

Creating a diverse team to think creatively about Gaston County's strengths, and about positive stories, can help expand the possibilities. The team can seek opportunities to highlight Gaston County's diverse cultures and local communities as part of a broader, connected narrative of One Gaston. Communicating about Gaston's strengths within and outside the County could include the use of billboards, window decals, t-shirts, or contests.

Programs that recognize Gaston residents - such as the annual Community Leadership Awards or Women Who Rock - are opportunities for storytelling.





GASTON SHINES Strategy 1.2: Encourage stakeholders to be positive ambassadors for Gaston County.

The people who live, work, and play in Gaston County are its natural advocates. Business executives and other leaders who represent Gaston County outside the community could be provided with talking points to highlight One Gaston 2040 initiatives and key community strengths. Taken a step further, a speakers bureau of respected community leaders could be established to meet with various constituencies (e.g., civic clubs, places of worship, etc.) and present updates on One Gaston strategic work and outcomes.

Hospitality and retail workers and others who come into regular contact with visitors can be energized to showcase Gaston County's strengths and assets. An example of this type of initiative has been working in Muskegon, Michigan. Their four-hour program, called Muskegon Star!, is taught by the chamber and employment training agency. It is a crash course on everything Muskegon from attractions, the arts, and festivals, to recreation, restaurants, shopping, and lodging. The program also includes customer-service training.

Young professionals can be an especially active group of community boosters. Quarterly social events targeting this group would be opportunities to highlight different key quality of life amenities in Gaston County.

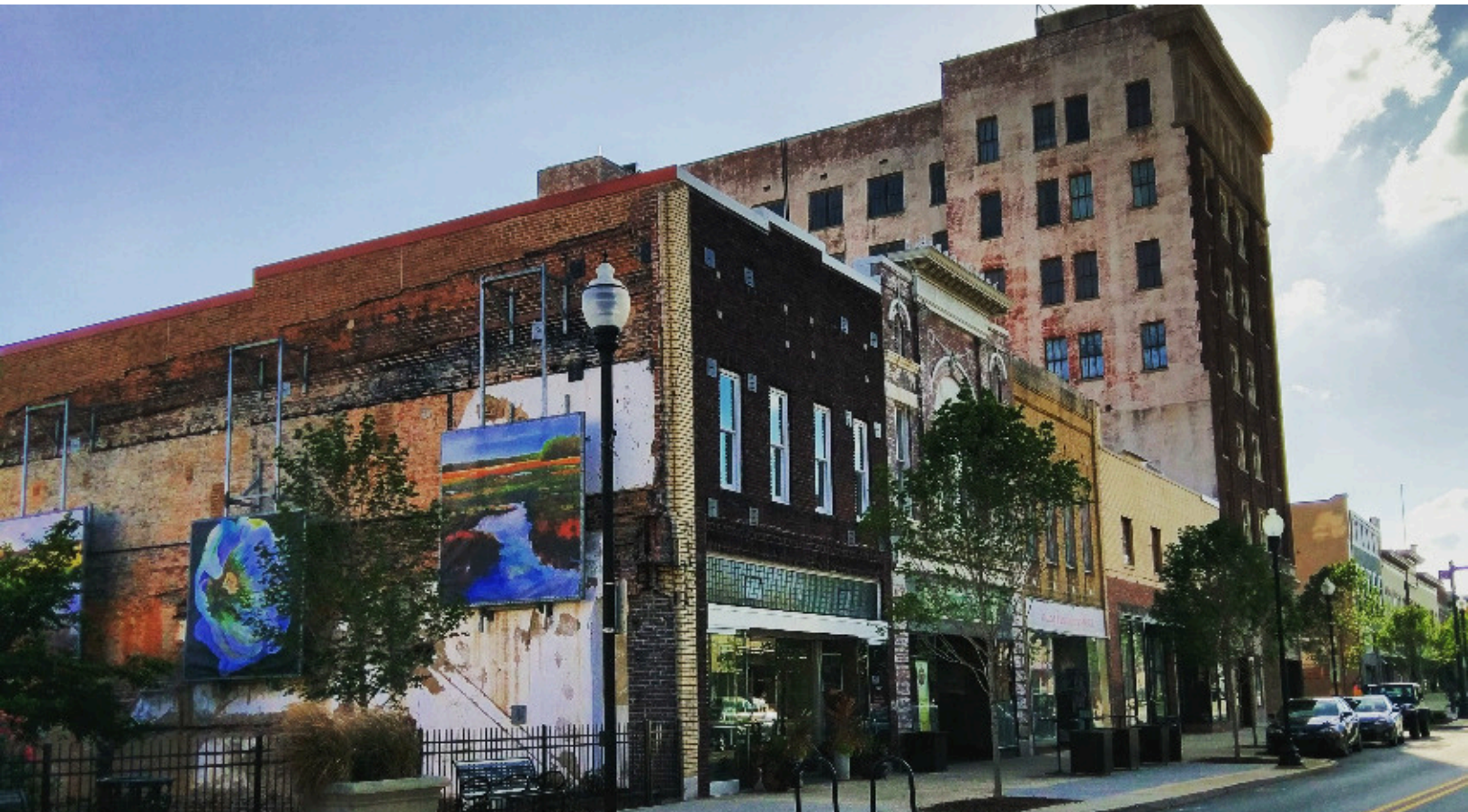
GASTON SHINES Strategy 1.3: Engage local social media influencers to positively promote Gaston County.

Social media influencers from within the County and from other parts of the Charlotte region can help spread positive messages about the County. Events and outreach can be designed to introduce them to the County's amenities, assets, and festivals.

ONE GASTON SHINES OBJECTIVE 2: LEVERAGE ARTS AND CULTURE

One Gaston 2040 input participants often mentioned the importance of arts and culture to bring Gaston County together, tell its stories, highlight its most creative residents, improve quality of life, and create interest for visitors. Many communities use public art to improve the look of the community's public spaces, highlight an interesting element of their history, or provide a way for local artists to showcase their work and build a following.

Additionally, residents talked about the value that arts venues can bring to a community.



GASTON SHINES Strategy 2.1: Use public art to tell stories about Gaston County, boost local pride, and attract visitors.

Gaston County already has a rich tradition of community murals. Several downtowns can boast one or more large, colorful murals. This tradition can be leveraged to add more color to area streets and business districts. An example of purposefully using murals in community is the Charlottesville Mural Project in Charlottesville, VA.

Expanding on the public art as community branding idea, some communities have chosen a single image, theme, or concept, and found ways to repeat it across their geography. Examples include cows in Chicago, the phoenix in Atlanta, guitars in Nashville, and horses in Lexington.

Public art can translate into greater awareness and visitation of local galleries, museums, theaters, and concert venues, by putting images of public art on postcards, t-shirts, bumper stickers, and other items that celebrate and promote the local arts sector. Crowdfunding sites (websites where you can donate money to a particular effort) can be used as tools to fund investment pools to commission projects from local artists.



GASTON SHINES Strategy 2.2: Nurture groups and venues that bring art, music, theater, dance, and other artforms to the public.

During Gaston Vision engagement workshops, the topic of arts venues was discussed by residents. Opportunities to bring artists together to create and share their creations was often mentioned as a way to build community pride, highlight diversity, and provide creative community engagement options.

