

ONE GASTON 2040



A PLACE WHERE **EVERYONE** THRIVES



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A CALL TO ACTION

The Gaston Vision 2040 Team is delighted to present this Vision back to the community that created it.

When we began, we invited people who care about Gaston County to “create an image of our community’s future” and to “describe a place where we can agree we want to journey together.” We asked you where you want Gaston County to go and what you want it to be, you responded, and we listened.

We hope that this Vision will be a springboard from which our community - businesses and non-profit organizations and local governments and ALL of us - working together, will create the County we aspire to be in 2040. We will need rich dialogue, critical decision-making, innovation, and resourcefulness. We will need to come together in new ways and find ways to measure our progress toward the future we all want. This Vision is a framework for collaboration - and it marks the beginning of the journey.

We are grateful for the support we have received from all sectors of Gaston County. Please refer to our Supporters page in this document for acknowledgement of those who have provided funding. Additionally, we have been the beneficiaries of the time and attention of the leaders and employees of many organizations across the County who have added value to this process.

Primarily, though, we are grateful to all of you who took the time to attend an engagement meeting, hear and respond to a presentation, or complete a survey. Because of what we heard from you, we can present this Vision with confidence as a call to action for the journey we want to take together.

WITH GRATITUDE, HOPE, AND READINESS,
THE GASTON VISION 2040 TEAM



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ONE GASTON 2040

One Gaston 2040 Vision

Why create a vision now? Gaston County is part of a powerhouse economic region, and people are attracted to the County's quality of life, small-town character, and natural beauty. Our population is growing, our diversity is increasing, economic development is affecting our housing trends and changing our local character, and issues of equity and inclusion are natural outgrowths of change. As we emerge from the pandemic, it is critical that we can answer the question, "What is our place in the Charlotte region?"

The hopes and intentions of the county's residents for 2040 can be summed up by this Vision Statement:

One Gaston: A place where everyone thrives.

This simple statement packs a lot of meaning.

"One Gaston" means that the County will work together as a community, and that divisions that exist across different geographies, different races and ethnicities, and different neighborhoods will be less important than the commonalities when it comes to the wellbeing of the community. It means that the community will find ways to collaborate and coordinate efforts so that there is less risk of any part of the community being left behind or having fewer opportunities than others.

"A place where everyone thrives" means every person will have the ability to meet their needs and enjoy healthy lives. Everyone will have access to services and resources. Not only individuals, but also businesses, neighborhoods, organizations, and local governments will be energized by their vibrant community.





DEFINING TRAITS

There are a set of traits or characteristics that Gaston County residents aspire to see in the county from now to 2040. These traits provide more context and clarity to the vision. They are:

Sense of Belonging

People will feel welcomed and valued in Gaston County, long-term residents, newcomers, commuters, and visitors alike.

Collaborative Spirit

Collaboration will be a byword for success in Gaston County, as people and organizations join forces to address community challenges and leverage the benefits of growth.

Unique Locales

Gaston County has it all: mountains, lakes, trails, parks, farmland, charming downtown districts. These locales will continue to lend character and vibrance to the County.

Quality Growth

Robust economic growth will be a part of Gaston County's future, bringing investment, jobs, and opportunity, without destroying the things that residents value.

Inclusive Opportunity

No one will feel excluded from or overlooked by the community. Everyone will see people who look like them in positions of leadership in the community.

The Process of Creating the Vision

One Gaston 2040 was an ambitious process designed to identify a Vision for what Gaston County, a fast-growing community in the Charlotte region, can achieve between now and 2040. The process began in Spring 2022 with a goal of engaging county residents, businesses, and organizations in dialogue about their desires for the future of Gaston County and to use the results of that discussion, along with an examination of data and trends, to create a vision for what Gaston County can achieve between today and 2040.

The visioning process was informed by a set of guiding principles that influenced how the process was conducted and structured how the vision framework was developed. These principles were:

- **Robust, inclusive, multi-channel community engagement.** Across 70 virtual, in-person, and on-line survey opportunities, over 1700 people have made their views known.
- **An invitation to discuss difficult topics.** Discussions were open and candid.
- **Acknowledging our differences and seeking areas of consensus toward common goals.** Though differences arise as a result of our geography, population diversity, time of life, and personal interests, the defining qualities we seek for our community can be the same.
- **“Baking in” an implementation plan that brings stakeholders together.** After calling the community together to create this shared vision, we will not let it sit on the shelf. Instead, we will move directly into implementation, call on our organizations and residents to set specific goals, and collaborate to make progress toward the vision.
- **A way to measure progress.** An online data dashboard will be created and maintained, a resource for residents, visitors, prospective businesses, and researchers who are looking for detailed information about Gaston County.
- **Powered by public/private collaboration and support.** Every local government in the county committed resources to the effort. Twenty-two individuals, businesses, and non-profit organizations provided monetary contributions. Going forward, implementation of the Vision will also be a public/private endeavor.

Dozens of existing reports, plans, and strategies were reviewed and high-level quantitative research was conducted comparing Gaston County trends to those in North Carolina, the United States, and peer communities including Spartanburg County, SC; Sumner County, TN; and Union County, NC. The list of referenced materials for the One Gaston 2040 process is contained in **Appendix A** of this report.

WHAT DID THE COMMUNITY TELL US?

Over 1,700 Gaston County stakeholders contributed their ideas and perspectives to the One Gaston 2040 process. The principal takeaways from all these interactions, coupled with findings from a high-level quantitative analysis of Gaston County trends compared to peer counties, North Carolina, and the U.S., led to a set of key themes summarizing Gaston County's strengths, weaknesses, challenges, and opportunities.

Summarized below, these research themes and their underlying components formed the basis of the One Gaston 2040 Vision.

Gaston County has a competitive array of core assets and amenities that position it for future growth, including:

- Proximity to Charlotte and Charlotte Douglas International Airport
- Natural environments and amenities
- Historic downtowns and unique destinations
- Community spirit and pride
- Confidence in public schools and higher education institutions
- Production employment and strong skills base

Persistent legacy challenges must still be overcome. They include:

- Historical divides between different parts of the county (urban/suburban/rural/etc.)
- Evolving relations among racial and ethnic groups
- Lower levels of educational attainment
- Pockets of poverty, crime, and disinvestment



Gaston County has seen positive demographic and economic trends yet still lags some peer communities. Local positive trends include:

- Population, job growth, wages, and incomes are all rising
- Improving educational attainment
- Notable poverty reduction
- Perception of county improving

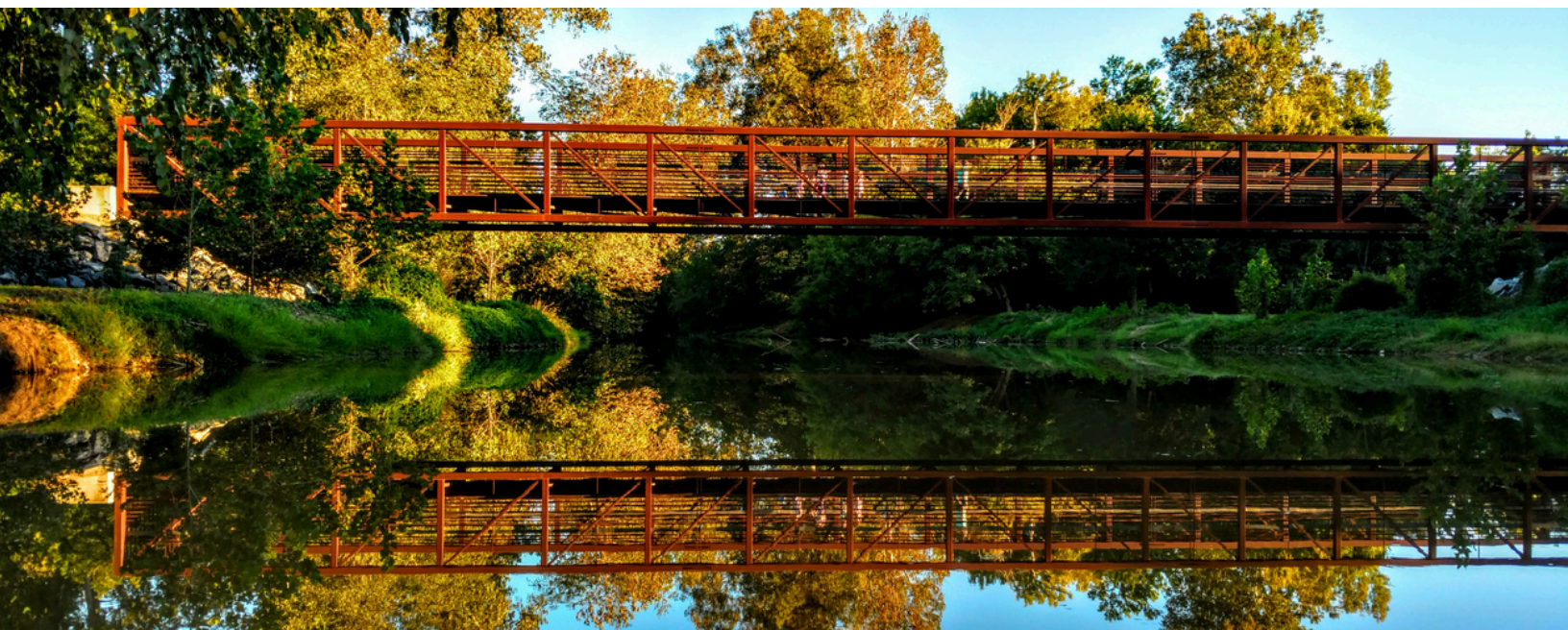
Impacts of growth on Gaston County create both issues and opportunities.

Examples include:

- Notable quality of life investments – Renovation of mill structures, FUSE District, revitalization of downtowns
- The expansion of CaroMont Health hospitals and facilities
- Understanding the tradeoffs between new development and protection of natural environments
- Concerns over gentrification and Not In My Back Yard (NIMBYism)
- Lack of affordable housing

Key issues as Gaston County positions itself for the future include:

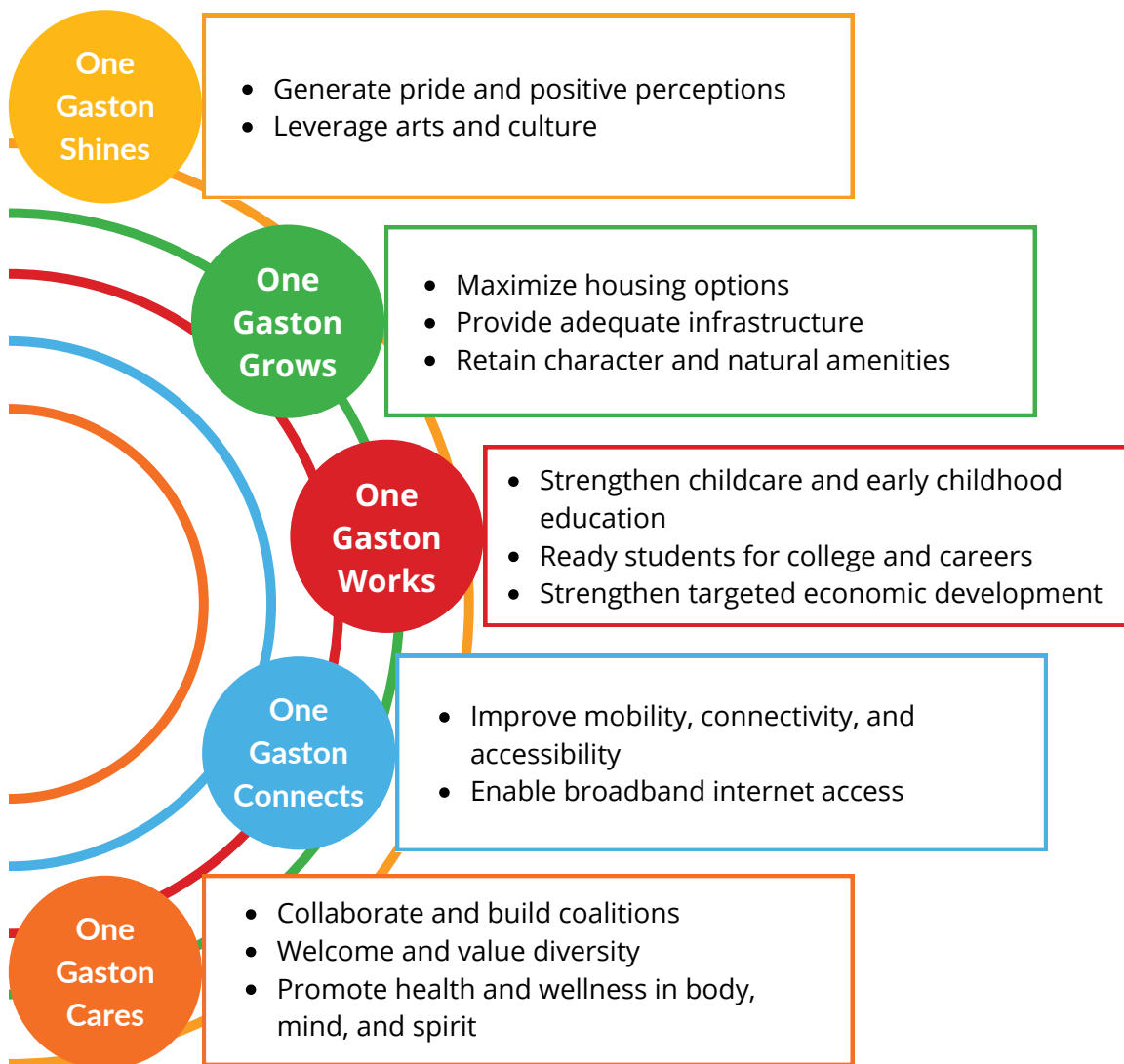
- Improved connectivity within Gaston County and with the rest of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg region
- Preserving character and retaining history while evolving to meet the challenges of future growth
- Developing sustainable infrastructure for people and businesses
- Preparing local talent for careers
- Engaging diverse voices in decision making and leadership



Framework for Collaboration and Action

We can think of One Gaston 2040 as a framework for collaboration and action, giving shape to the work to come. In addition to a Vision Statement and Defining Traits, the One Gaston 2040 framework establishes five Focus Areas around which partners will come together to coordinate, plan, and carry out strategic action to implement the Vision. A Focus Area Team will be created to advance the work of each area.

Connections will be made between the Teams to ensure that their work is collaborative, efforts are not redundant, and activities with broad impact can benefit multiple Focus Areas. The following graphic displays One Gaston 2040's five Focus Areas and underlying objectives.



The remainder of this document contains descriptions of the One Gaston 2040 framework, centered around five Focus Areas and objectives. For the purposes of this document, each Focus Area is defined by:

An **OUTCOME**: The outcome statement is a simple declaration of the fulfillment of the community's Vision in that Focus Area.

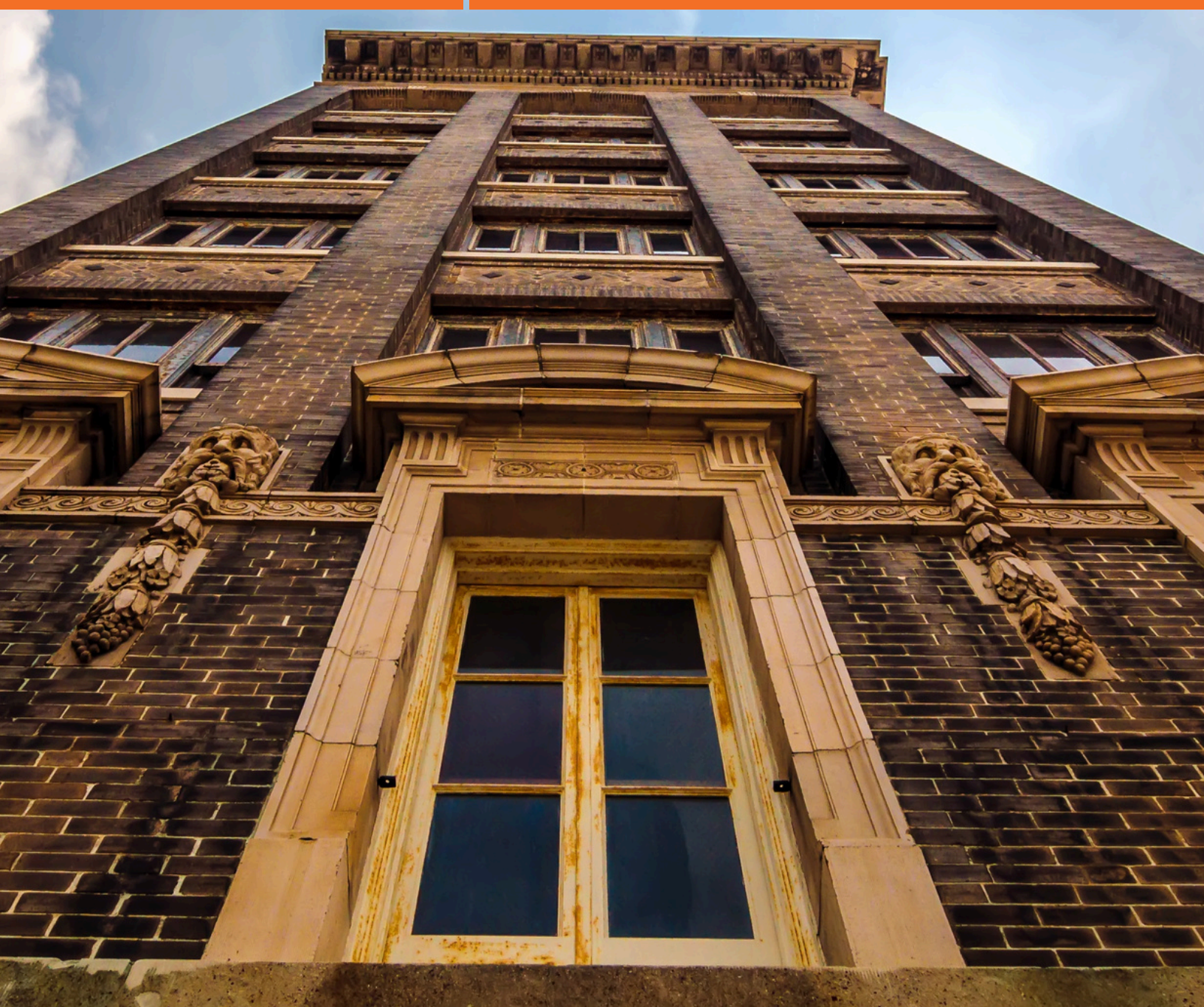
A set of **OBJECTIVES**: Objectives serve to categorize areas of work leading to the desired outcome.

Generalized **STRATEGIES**: Strategies provide further definition to each objective. In some cases, specific opportunities are identified for Gaston County, and occasionally a program or initiative from another community is cited as an example of how others have approached the challenge. Full descriptions of these comparative examples can be found in **Appendix B** of this report.



ONE GASTON CARES

We are healthy in mind,
body, and spirit, and our
communities work
together for quality of
life for all.





ONE GASTON CARES

We are healthy in body, mind, and spirit, and our communities work together for quality of life for all.

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

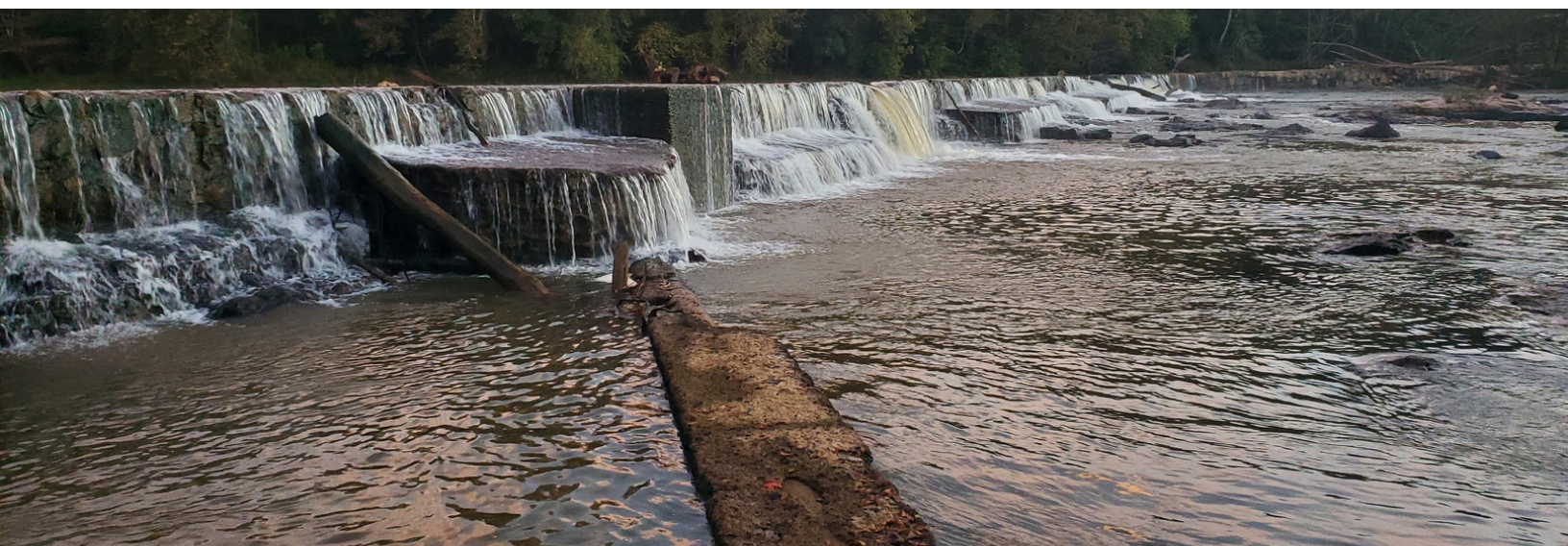
Ranked in order of importance, with 5 being the most important.



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."

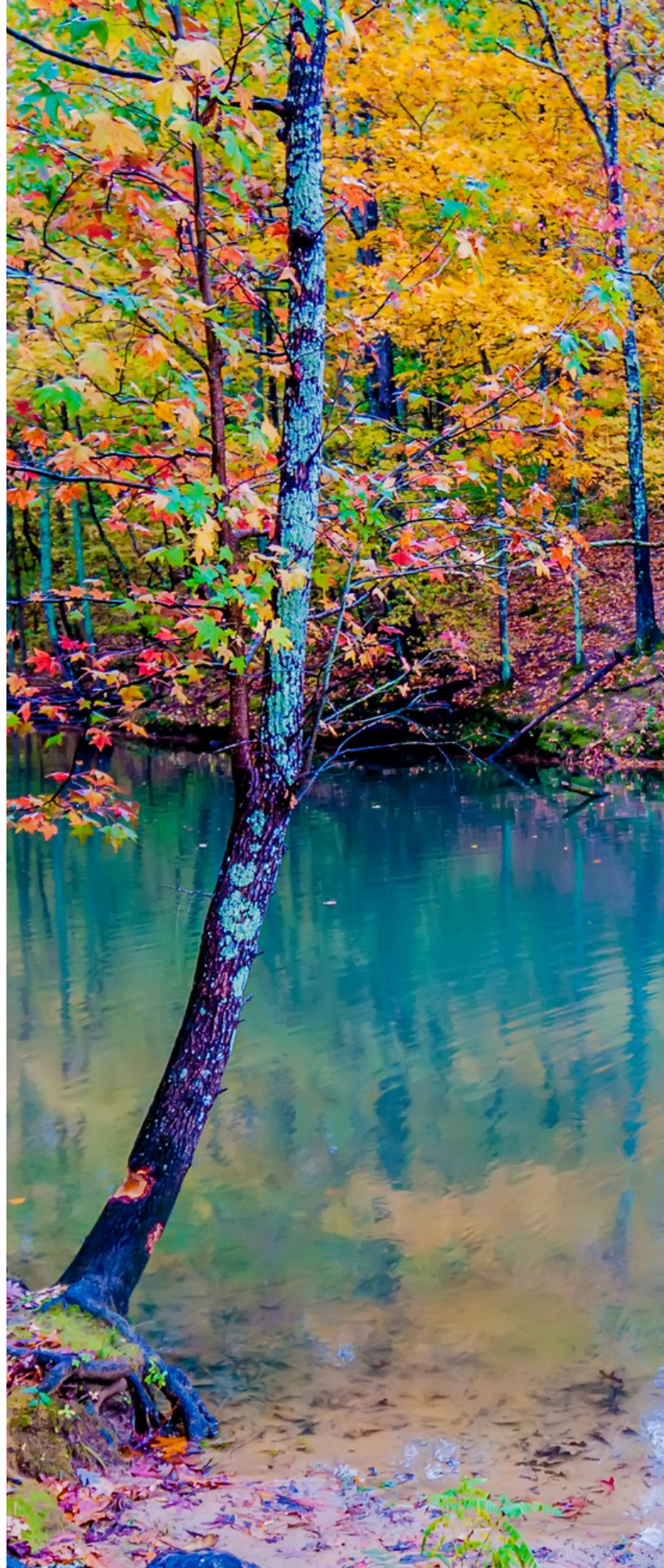


GASTON CARES Strategy 2.1:
Foster conversations,
connections, trust, and a new
understanding of Gaston
County's diversity by valuing
diversity in leadership
and culture.

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.



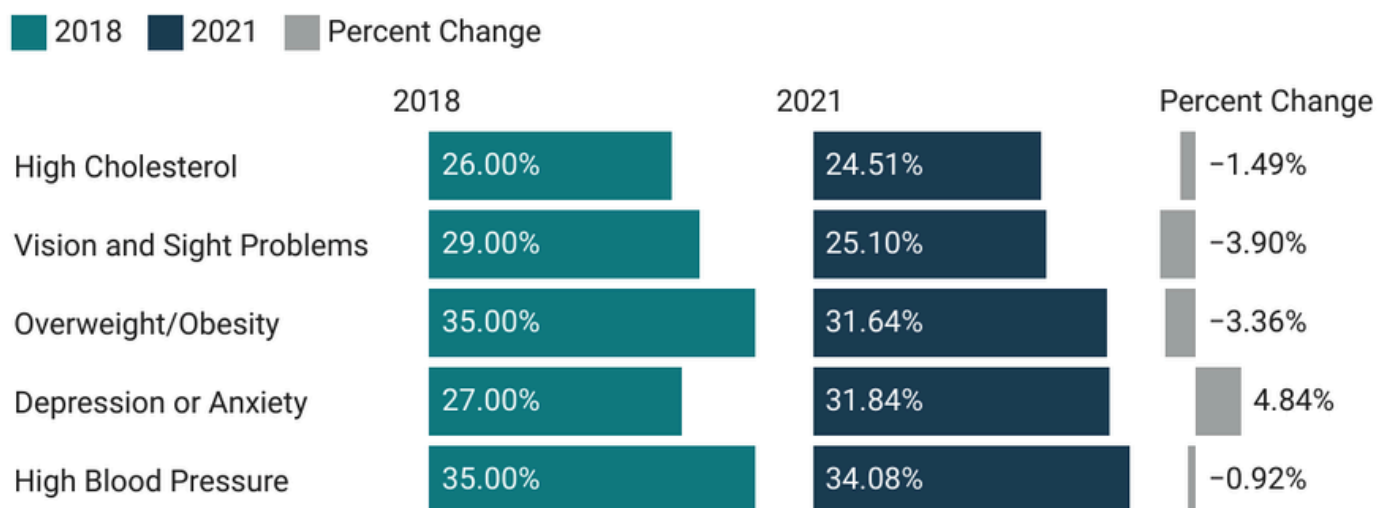
GASTON CARES OBJECTIVE 3: PROMOTE HEALTH AND WELLNESS

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.

ONE GASTON CONNECTS

We have convenient access to the internet, and the ability to get around by walking, biking, driving, and using public transit.



ONE GASTON CONNECTS

We have convenient access to the internet, and the ability to get around by walking, biking, driving, and using public transit.

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.

82%
OF GASTON COUNTY
WORKERS
COMMUTE TO WORK
VIA CAR, TRUCK,
OR VAN

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

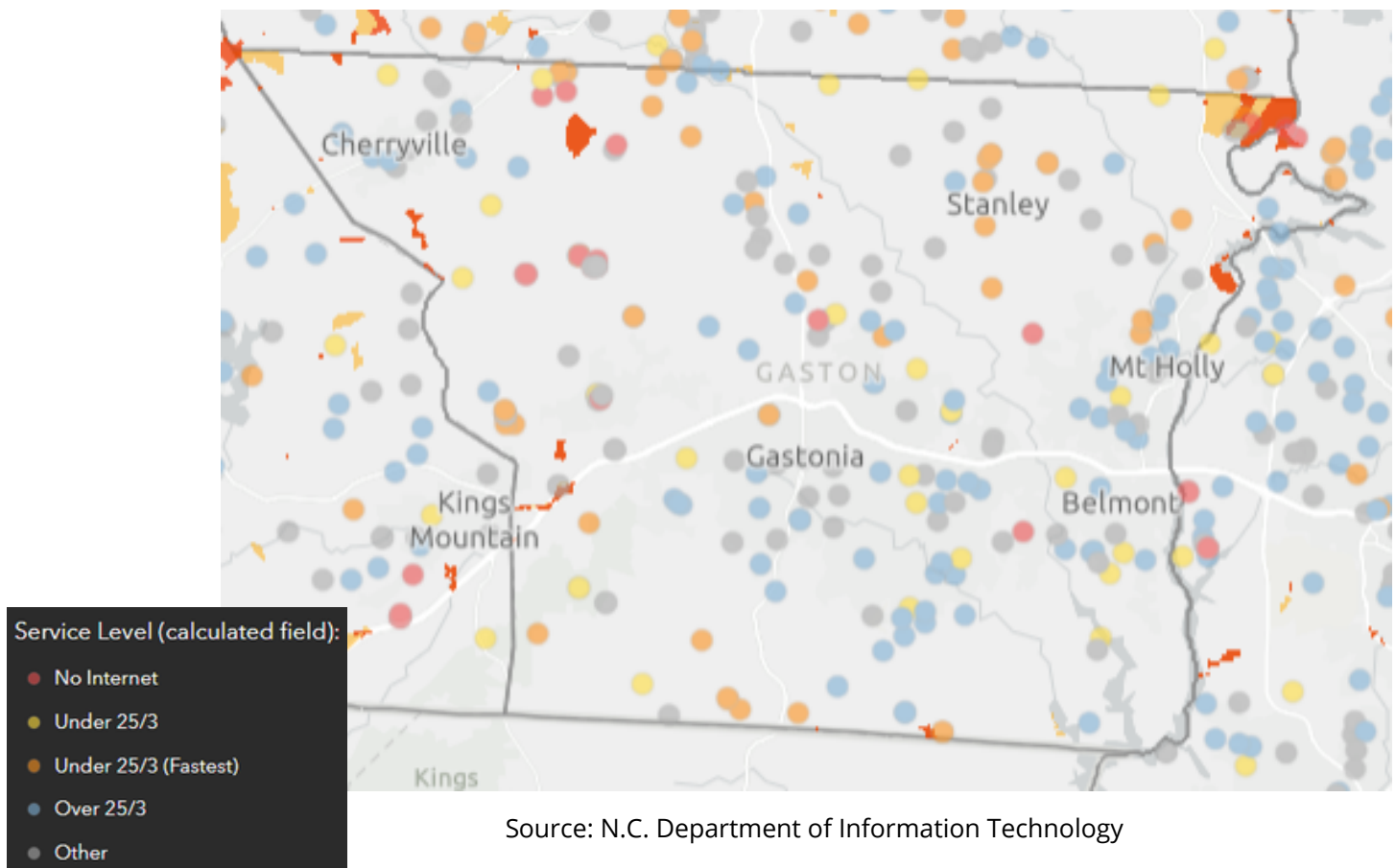
Community members said that many families in Gaston County struggled with remote work and virtual school during the pandemic. The community members also expressed a strong desire to see the community address digital equity gaps by helping more households access the internet. In the post-pandemic world,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



ONE GASTON GROWS

We achieve quality growth
and economic success by
using our land and
resources wisely.

ONE GASTON GROWS

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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.





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.



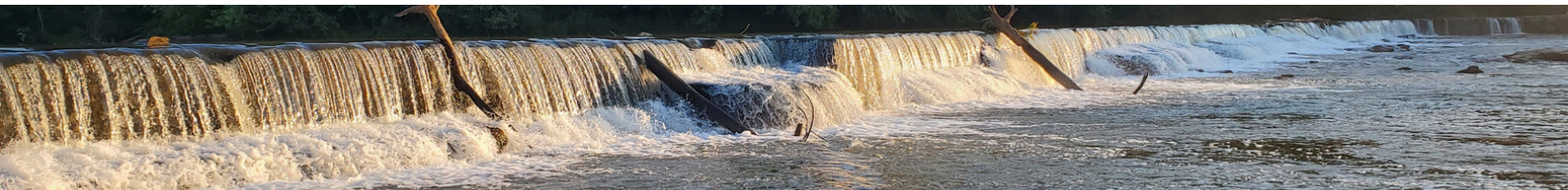
ONE GASTON GROWS OBJECTIVE 2: PROVIDE ADEQUATE INFRASTRUCTURE

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.



A large, rusted metal water tower stands against a cloudy sky. The tower is made of weathered steel with visible rivets and a spiral staircase winding around its base. A red rectangular overlay covers the middle section of the image, containing text.

ONE GASTON WORKS

We have great job and career opportunities, and we are prepared and equipped to succeed.

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We have great job and career opportunities, and we are prepared and equipped to succeed.

Community and economic development strategies vary widely in scope and scale, but at their core they share a common goal: raising standards of living and improving quality of life for residents. Usually this means having access to jobs that pay living wages and offer opportunities for career advancement. While many jobs require some type of post-secondary training credential or two-year degree, earning a four-year degree is no longer a requirement for well-paying employment.

APPROXIMATELY

22%

OF GASTON COUNTY
RESIDENTS AGED 25+
HAVE OBTAINED AT LEAST
A BACHELOR'S DEGREE

Educational attainment rates in Gaston County are relatively low. Approximately 22% of Gaston County residents aged 25 and over have obtained at least a bachelor's degree; in North Carolina and the U.S., this figure is roughly 32%. On a positive note, Gaston County's educational attainment levels have improved in recent years, a testament to the work of key local partners like Gaston County Schools (GCS), private and charter schools, Gaston College, and Belmont Abbey College.

The Gaston Business Association recently launched a program seeking to improve talent development and job placement outcomes by providing educators and trainers with actionable data on workforce skills and credentials demanded by local employers. GBA's new Talent Pipeline Management (TPM) Program has been endorsed by Gaston County Schools, Belmont Abbey College, Gaston College, and the Gaston Workforce Development Board as an essential element of the county's workforce system moving forward.



ONE GASTON WORKS OBJECTIVE 1: STRENGTHEN CHILDCARE AND EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

In order for parents to participate in the workforce, they need access to affordable childcare. The years from birth to kindergarten are critical for a child's social, emotional, and educational development. Research has shown children enrolled in pre-kindergarten (PK) and similar early childhood education programs are more likely to succeed in school and experience positive outcomes later in life. Availability of childcare also has an impact on the strength of a community's workforce. In communities across the country, this challenge has been further exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic's impact on parents and childcare providers.

Gaston County Schools Pre-Kindergarten program places approximately 900 four year olds each year in public schools and private childcare sites. Services for qualifying low-income children are offered through Gaston Community Action's Head Start Program. Seven Head Start centers in Gaston and Lincoln Counties provide 431 low-income children with education programs, family case management, disability services and support, mental health services, meal plans, and health screenings.

The following strategies and potential actions reflect the strong desire of Gaston County stakeholders to expand quality childcare and PK opportunities to additional eligible youth in multiple age groups.





GASTON WORKS Strategy 1.1: Provide affordable, available, quality childcare enabling adults to secure and retain jobs.

Further assessment can help the community understand existing capacity and barriers to the creation of new licensed childcare facilities, and the idea of providing grants or incentives for expanding childcare capacity can be explored. In Boise, Idaho, a Childcare Task Force has recommended actions by local government, community organizations, and the business community, all aimed at creating and sustaining quality childcare. Some employers may be able to expand on-site care and/or childcare benefits for employees.

GASTON WORKS Strategy 1.2: Ensure pre-kindergarten programs are available for all.

North Carolina's Pre-Kindergarten Program (NCPK) provides statewide funding. Beyond this, there may be opportunities to seek competitive grants and other monies to support PK expansion and/or supportive services such as before- and after-school care programs. Some communities have implemented local option taxes to fund pre-kindergarten expansion.

ONE GASTON WORKS OBJECTIVE 2: READY STUDENTS FOR COLLEGE AND CAREERS

A strong talent pipeline is critical to a community's economic competitiveness and the prosperity and wellbeing of its residents. The county already features many existing career focused efforts, including Gaston County Schools Career and Technical Education program that offers courses in a wide range of occupational categories, including Business and Marketing, Family and Consumer Sciences, Health Sciences, and Trades and Industrial. The district's Business Advisory Council meets twice a year to discuss existing and potential career focused programming.

Gaston County is home to several innovative educational programs. The Gaston Early College High School program, a magnet school partnership with Gaston College, enables Gaston Public Schools students to receive a high school diploma, complete college courses, and earn an associate in arts, associate in science, and/or associate in engineering degree. At GCS' Highland School of Technology, Gaston County's first magnet high school, students complete courses in one of three academies: Health Sciences; Business, Legal, and Information Sciences; or Manufacturing/Engineering Technology and Graphics.

Gaston County's career focused training was further advanced when Belmont Abbey College recently leased land for CaroMont Health's new \$300 million hospital, part of the college's long-term plan to train medical professionals through a new Bachelor of Nursing and a Master of Health Administration degrees. Healthcare training is also provided through the Gaston Early College of Medical Sciences (GECMS), a healthcare focused high school designed for students interested in careers in the medical/healthcare industry. The new school is a collaborative effort between Gaston County Schools, Gaston College, Belmont Abbey College, and CaroMont Health.



Even with these talent pipeline strengths, input participants identified areas for improvement. Many businesses have found it difficult to tap into local talent pools and education networks. At the same time, some students and families are unaware of career opportunities in Gaston County's target sectors. Input participants also said there is a need to address communication and data gaps between education and industry, and to ensure that PK-12 schools are sufficiently resourced.

The strategies proposed in this One Gaston Works objective leverage existing efforts and propose new capacity to prepare students for success by connecting them to college and career opportunities matching their interests, goals, and skill sets.

GASTON WORKS Strategy 2.1: Optimize the approach presented by the Gaston Business Association Talent Pipeline Management program.

To address these concerns, GBA's Talent Pipeline Management framework is oriented around six sequenced strategies that build off one another to support employers in developing a data-and-performance-driven approach to improving education and workforce partnerships.

The initiative can also include developing projections for job openings to quantify employers' talent and skills needs, creating a shared language to better communicate competency, credentialing, and other hiring requirements.

GASTON WORKS Strategy 2.2: Ensure local schools can successfully advance all students to college or careers.

Gaston County can claim their focus on career preparation as an area of strength. Gaston County Schools, private and charter schools, Gaston College, and Belmont Abbey all have innovative programs that increase student opportunity. These programs need to continue to aim for community awareness, and to coordinate opportunities for competitive grant funding and other philanthropic resources.



GASTON WORKS Strategy 2.3: Expose students early and often to local career paths and workplaces.

Gaston County offers many opportunities for students to be exposed to career opportunities and to begin their path toward entry into the workforce. Continuation and enhancement of these efforts is important. These include but are not limited to:

- Gaston County Schools' A.S.P.I.R.E. afterschool community learning center program, where PK to 5 students to connect with local businesses through in-class visits and field trips
- GCS's Career and Technical Education program, Early College High School, Early College of Medical Sciences, and Highland School of Technology to expose students to local career opportunities and training tracks
- Gaston College's Certificate and Associate of Applied Science programs in Textiles Technology and "2+2" degree articulation agreement with NC State's Wilson College of Textiles

Enabling and encouraging educators and guidance counselors to get an in-person look at manufacturing facilities and other career opportunities prepares them to support student decision-making.

A centralized online clearinghouse for any internships and apprenticeships offered by Gaston County businesses could help match candidates with local opportunities.



Gaston Works Strategy 2.4: Effectively communicate with parents.

Even if career building opportunities exist and students have been exposed to them, that may not be enough. Parents need to know what's available as well, in order to help their children make connections between their interests and these opportunities. Parents also need to be involved early.

Gaston County Schools already hosts an online Parent Academy, and outreach can help ensure parents are aware of it. There might be an opportunity to expand it into a comprehensive Parent University model, like the Parent University in Mesa, Arizona.

ONE GASTON WORKS OBJECTIVE 3: STRENGTHEN TARGETED ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Stakeholders in Gaston County expressed a strong desire to see their community grow a diverse range of high-quality job opportunities for its residents. Numerous factors influence a community's competitiveness for job growth, many of which are addressed in other One Gaston 2040 Focus Areas and objectives. Traditional economic development activities such as business recruitment and business retention and expansion (BRE) remain essential components of a balanced and holistic community and economic development initiative.

The Gaston County Business Retention and Expansion program, staffed by the Gaston County Economic Development Commission (GCEDC), includes on-site visits where staff seek to understand the business's core products or services, industry capabilities, and growth issues, then provide customized growth assistance. This could include location services, land and building availability and costs, and meeting facilitation with property brokers or agents.

The Gaston Business Association, the result of a merger between the Gaston Regional Chamber of Commerce and the Greater Gaston Development Corporation, delivers a strong, unified voice for local businesses. The GBA provides traditional member support services as well as a broader strategic approach to economic development. In addition to the workforce services profiled earlier in this Goal Area, GBA is the county's principal advocate at the state, local, and federal level for policies and programs supportive of Gaston County's economic competitiveness and growth.



GASTON WORKS Strategy 3.1: Maintain excellent relationships with local businesses, relocation prospects, and site consultants.

Effective coordination between the EDC, GBA, and economic development professionals in the cities and towns is vital to business retention and expansion, site identification and development, and industry recruitment.



GASTON WORKS Strategy 3.2: Communicate economic development programs, growth opportunities, and successes to internal and external audiences.

Gaston County has a robust set of economic development tools at its disposal and has a record of success in retention and recruitment. Regular communication and collaboration between economic development practitioners, elected officials, and other key partners will maximize the effectiveness of these tools. For example, Gaston College's Small Business Center (SBC) provides entrepreneurs with information they need to start or expand a small business, including free seminars, resource centers, and one-on-one counseling.

The Economic Development Partnership of North Carolina (EDPNC) and the Charlotte Regional Business Alliance are valuable external partners who can provide marketing opportunities outside of the community (e.g., trade missions and conferences).

ONE GASTON SHINES

We will have a sense of
pride about all Gaston
County has to offer.



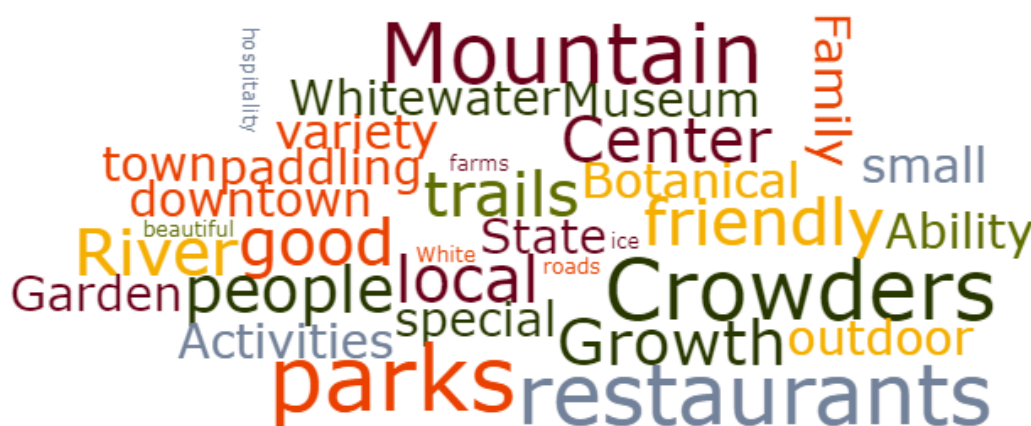
ONE GASTON SHINES

We will have a sense of pride about all Gaston County has to offer.

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.

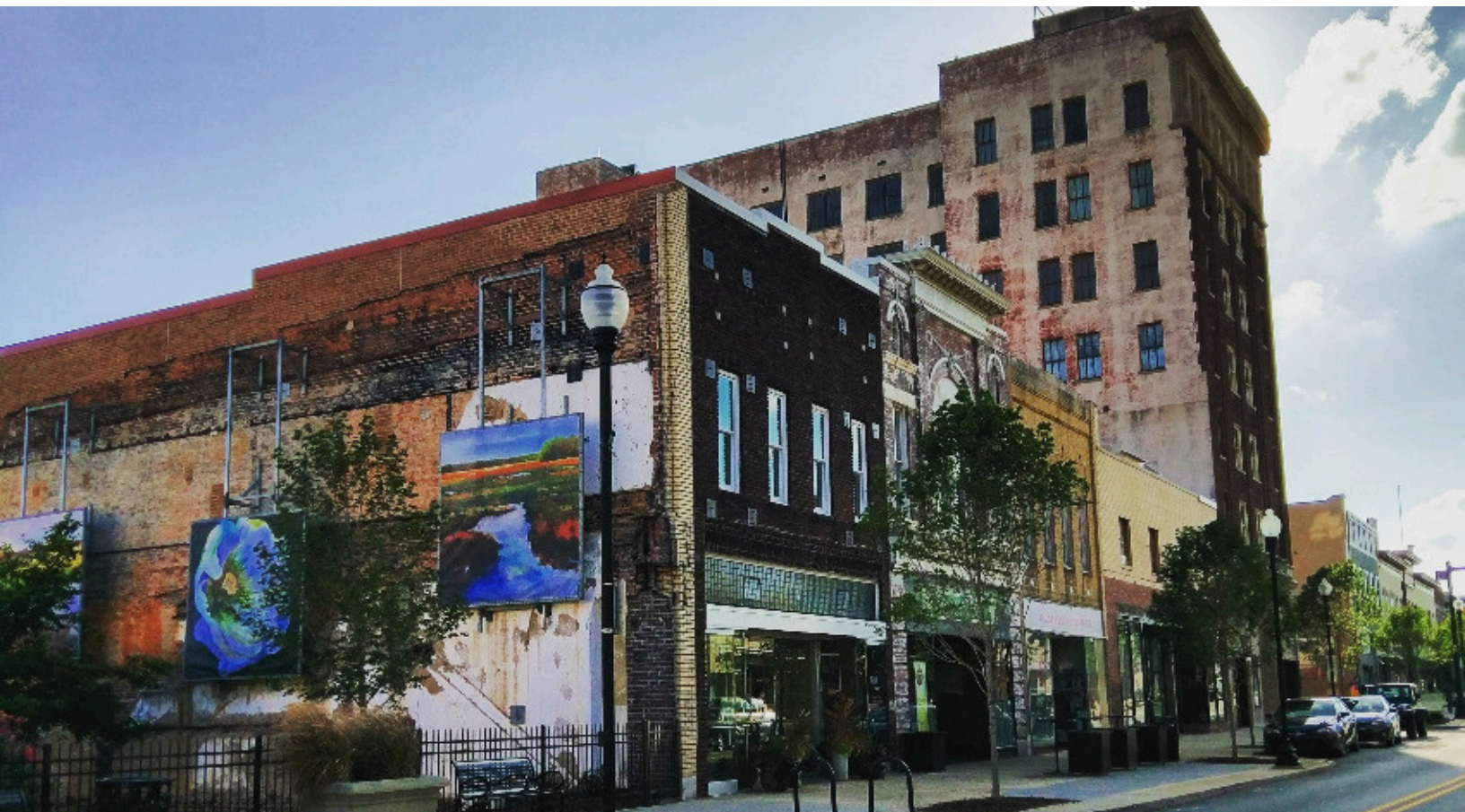
GASTON SHINES Strategy 1.3: Engage local social media influencers to positively promote Gaston County.

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.





ONE GASTON 2040

Vision Implementation



ONE GASTON 2040 VISION IMPLEMENTATION

The completion of the One Gaston 2040 Vision Framework represents the “end of the beginning” for the process of moving Gaston County toward an even more successful, equitable, and sustainable future. The real work begins when the plan’s objectives and strategies are put into action.

The Gaston Vision team was consistently clear that development and fulfillment of an implementation approach was as important as development of the vision itself. Implementation will require leadership, accountability, and collaboration among a broad array of organizations, entities, and individuals to build consensus around the plan’s goals and objectives, develop the capacity necessary to advance priority efforts, and collect and analyze data to measure progress towards achievement of the plan’s vision.

An effective implementation structure will consist of:

An entity or organization that will provide overall leadership toward implementation. This entity will be responsible for keeping track of and coordinating all the moving parts associated with activating the vision plan. Another word for an organization that manages complex strategic implementation is a backbone. The roles of the backbone organization include:

- Providing guidance and initial team building and capacity building to the Focus Area Teams as necessary
- Managing a network of volunteer Focus Area Teams by establishing and maintaining a regular meeting schedule, communications approach, and facilitation of a process to confirm and operationalize priority tactical activities supporting achievement of One Gaston 2040’s vision
- Influencing coordinated strategic implementation in collaboration with key public and private partners
- Communicating and coordinating with organizations and individuals actively engaged in programmatic work aligned with One Gaston 2040 Focus Areas
- Helping represent One Gaston 2040 in the community and maintain ongoing public communication about the vision to build awareness and reinforce the messaging of the vision statement, defining traits, and Focus Area outcome goals
- Tracking and communicating One Gaston 2040 implementation activity measures to complement the reporting of quantitative trends on the initiative’s public data dashboard
- Ensuring that senior executives new to the county (e.g., city managers, school leaders, non-profit executives, faith community leaders, etc.) receive an introduction to the vision and the role that their organization may play in ongoing implementation
- Lead or participate in efforts to secure funding for implementation activities

Focus Area Teams with the capacity to create and carry out action plans that address the Vision's objectives and strategies and determine how to collect data that will help measure progress toward the goals. Organizations, entities, and county residents active in or concerned about the Vision's main components will comprise the teams. Each Focus Area Team will be convened and directed by senior leaders from one or two of the participating organizations and/or people who can serve as community champions for the needed actions.

Effective data management and performance tracking is essential to the implementation of a holistic Vision. Metrics are needed to assess progress and help investors and partner organizations determine whether implementation is producing a desired return on investment. One Gaston 2040 will benefit from a publicly accessible online data dashboard of community indicators. Dashboard development was an ongoing effort inter-related to and coinciding with creation of the Vision. An appropriate entity will be identified to house and maintain the dashboard, which will be accessed as part of, or closely linked to, the One Gaston 2040 website.

The Vision framework was completed through community-wide collaboration, coordination, intensive community engagement, and determination to succeed. These attributes will be the differentiating factors, also, in effective Vision implementation, enabling the community to journey together toward its goals between now and 2040.



ONE GASTON 2040

Appendix: A & B

G-1 ARMINGTON HOTEL, GASTONIA, N. C.



APPENDIX A: COMPARATIVE EXAMPLES

The following projects, programs, and initiatives are profiled to enable One Gaston 2040 implementation partners to explore example efforts of selected strategies in the plan. The comparison examples are not intended to represent best practices (although some may be considered as such) but rather opportunities to highlight programs and processes that can inform One Gaston 2040 implementation activities.

ONE GASTON CARES

Multicultural Receptions (Des Moines, IA)

<https://www.dsmpartnership.com/news-media/news/partnership-news/partnership-dmacc-urban-campus-to-host-multicultural-reception-on-april-13>

The Greater Des Moines Partnership sponsors a series of “Multicultural Receptions” to provide opportunities for those in the Greater Des Moines community to develop new relationships with others who are passionate about building an inclusive community for the region. A recent event held at a local community college began with a series of hour-long roundtable discussions where attendees explored a variety of diversity, equity and inclusion topics of importance to their organization and the community. The discussions were followed by a reception.

Ask a Local (Omaha, NE)

<https://www.omahachamber.org/talent-workforce/jobs-careers/ask-a-local/>

As part of Greater Omaha’s talent attraction efforts, residents can sign up for the “Ask a Local” program and have their bios and contact information posted on the Omaha Chamber’s talent and workforce page. The website urges visitors to get a local perspective, noting that, “These local Omahans are ready with answers when new residents or those looking to relocate to Omaha have questions.” Each Omaha ambassador lists a different set of interest areas for visitors to ask the about, including outdoor recreation, cooking, LGBTQIA+ communities, craft beers, roller derby, food, theater, sporting events, live music, neighborhoods, family activities, childcare, schools, food, and expatriate and immigrant issues.

New Business and Resident Welcome Reception (Coachella Valley, CA)

<https://gcvcc.org/event/new-business-and-resident-welcome-reception-4/>

The Greater Coachella Valley Chamber works with local partners to present New Business and Resident Welcome Receptions at locations around its service areas. The program consists of monthly one-hour meet and greets designed to connect new and incumbent community stakeholders. The receptions are free to attend and open to the public.

Civic Pathways (Metro Atlanta, GA)

<https://newamericanpathways.org/our-programs/#civic>

New American Pathways is an Atlanta based nonprofit that helps refugees settle and thrive in Georgia. The organization recently announced the second year of Civic Pathways, an eight-month leadership development program created in partnership with the University of Georgia's J.W. Fanning Institute of Leadership. The second iteration of the program included a series of monthly workshops, discussions, projects, and other activities designed to strengthen the skills of New Americans as civic leaders in their local communities.

MARTA Markets (Atlanta, GA)

<https://www.itsmarta.com/marta-market.aspx>

The MARTA Market provides farm stands at rail stations in the Atlanta region's rapid transit system in areas with limited food access. Each stand operates one day per week, providing fresh produce to MARTA customers from Tuesday to Friday at a different station each day. The goal is simple: help get healthy, fresh food into places where people already are.

The initiative is a partnership between MARTA and the Community Farmers Markets along with community partners like Atlanta Community Food Bank, Open Hand and Wholesome Wave Georgia. The MARTA Market sources locally grown produce from the farmers affiliated with Community Farmers Markets, as well as several local food hubs. This gives local farmers the opportunity to sell more produce to consumers that might not otherwise make it to a farmers market.

Hub City Farmers Market Mobile Market (Spartanburg, SC)

<https://www.hubcityfm.org/mobile-market>

Hub City Farmers Market is a nonprofit organization dedicated to increasing access to healthy food in Spartanburg, SC. The organization operates a weekly farmers market and urban farm in Spartanburg's Northside neighborhood. It also operates a "mobile market" that brings healthy food to numerous locations such as apartment complexes, community centers, and businesses around the Spartanburg community during the week.

ONE GASTON CONNECTS

Daniel Morgan Trail System (Spartanburg, SC)

<https://www.palspartanburg.org/the-dan>

The Daniel Morgan Trail System – known locally as “The Dan” – is an urban trail system in Spartanburg County, South Carolina. Leading the development of The Dan is PAL, a local nonprofit organization which derives its name from the slogan, “Play. Advocate. Live Well.” PAL is working with Spartanburg County Parks, the City of Spartanburg, and numerous other community partners to implement what will eventually be a 55- mile trail system. This vision became closer to becoming reality in November 2021 thanks to a successful grant application led by Spartanburg County’s government and PAL. The U.S. Department of Transportation awarded the community a \$23.8 million Rebuilding American Infrastructure with Sustainability & Equity (RAISE) grant that will fund nearly 14.6 miles of 10-foot-wide multi-use pathways, a pedestrian/bicycle bridge over Interstate 295, and numerous other improvements.

ONE GASTON GROWS

Housing Task Force (Lima, OH)

<https://www.limahousingtaskforce.org/>

One recommendation from a 2019 report assessing Lima’s housing challenges was to establish a committee to address the full spectrum of housing needs in the community. In 2020, Mayor David Berger established the Lima Housing Task Force. Subcommittees and their responsibilities are as follows:

- The Design and Infrastructure Subcommittee focuses on physical housing stock, including existing structures, new construction, and recommend changes necessary to encourage a diversity of housing types across the city. The subcommittee also “stress tests” development scenarios, discusses housing prototypes associated with income level affordability, and considers strategies to implement mixed-use and mixed-income development.
- The Innovation and Sustainability Subcommittee reviews creative partnerships and innovative funding mechanisms to jump start and increase the supply of housing units in Lima. The group also discusses incentives and resources needed to spur housing preservation and development.
- The Policy and Implementation Subcommittee is tasked with assessing a variety of best practice housing policies for both short- and long-term implementation. It is also conducting a long-term analysis of legal, financial, and organizational capacities to support new policies and programs aimed at achieving the goals of the task force.

Heart of Brevard (Brevard, NC)

<https://brevardnc.org/>

Heart of Brevard (HOB) is a nonprofit organization whose purpose is to maintain a vital downtown in Brevard, NC, a community of approximately 7,600 residents in Western North Carolina. According to the organization's website, revitalization is carried out through design, economic improvement, promotion, and organization. HOB has a staff of two and is guided by a board of directors made up of downtown business owners and civic leaders. It is funded by a balanced mix of public and private investment and is a program of the nonprofit National Main Street Center, a subsidiary of the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

Downtown Business Improvement District (Cary, NC)

<https://www.townofcary.org/recreation-enjoyment/downtown/downtown-business-improvement-district>

Cary, NC is a city of more than 170,000 residents located in Wake County, NC in the Raleigh-Durham region. In 2012, Cary's Town Council approved the establishment of a business improvement district (BID) in the community's downtown area as part of its downtown redevelopment plan. Unlike some BIDs that generate revenue to fund services such as beautification and public safety, the purpose of Cary's BID is to encourage development by reimbursing the Town for development fees associated with improvement permits that would normally be the responsibility of private developers. Projects must meet certain criteria to qualify for assistance; the tax rate for property owners in the BID will remain the same as that of the rest of Cary.

Downtown Business Improvement District (Greensboro, NC)

<https://www.downtowngreensboro.org/about-us/>

Greensboro, NC's Downtown Business Improvement District levies a special assessment on downtown business and property owners to provide enhanced services and programs that benefit the ratepayers. This district was created by downtown property owners and approved by City Council in 2005. These funds are governed by state law and are intended to enhance, not replace, government funding to Downtown. The BID is managed by Downtown Greensboro Incorporated, an economic development organization focused on stimulating investment and activity in the center city. DGI is a non-profit entity led by a 24-member Board of Directors.

Planning Review Panel (Toronto, ON)

<https://www.toronto.ca/city-government/planning-development/outreach-engagement/toronto-planning-review-panel/toronto-planning-review-panel-about/>

Toronto's Planning Review Panel represents an innovative approach to gathering resident input. It consists of a group of residents who meet regularly to learn about, discuss, and provide input to City Planning staff on important city planning issues. The Panel was created in part to remedy the fact that traditional consultation methods don't always allow City officials to hear from Toronto's many diverse communities equally.

ONE GASTON WORKS

Childcare Task Force (Boise, ID)

<https://www.cityofboise.org/departments/mayor/childcare-taskforce/>

Affordable, accessible, quality childcare was one of the top recommendations from the City of Boise's Economic Recovery Taskforce. To this end, a Childcare Task Force was convened in March of 2021 by the City of Boise to address existing hurdles to accessing childcare in the city and to better understand the needs of the childcare industry, childcare workers, and parents in Boise. The taskforce identified three areas of impact to focus attention and resources: licensing, accessibility, and affordability. Over the course of four months, the task force explored the issues facing childcare in Boise and developed specific recommendations the city could pursue in three areas of impact: 1) What the city could do itself, 2) What the city could do in partnership with businesses and community members, and 3) What businesses and community members could do to support childcare businesses and access to childcare.

Worlds of Work (West Alabama)

<https://worldsofwork.com>

Worlds of Work, better known in the region as "WOW" is an initiative of West Alabama Works, Region 3 Workforce Development Council and the Chamber of Commerce of West Alabama. The program seeks to create awareness about career options among students and educators in West Alabama Works' nine-county service area. WOW differentiates itself from traditional career and college fairs by offering fun, hands-on experiences at two signature events: an interactive career expo and a college and career day. The expo is for high school seniors who wish to enter the workforce full-time following graduation or work part-time while attending college.

Parent University (Mesa, AZ)

mpsaz.org/parentu/

For decades, Mesa Public Schools has operated a free continuous learning program to help students, parents, caretakers, and staff build skills to strengthen their family and community. The diverse offering of in-person and virtual sessions and workshops has assisted thousands of individuals. Programming is offered in both English and Spanish. The program is publicized through traditional and social media, information sent home with every student, and other district channels. Topics for sessions are relevant, often specifically requested by parents, and led by local and national speakers and experts.

FAFSA Volunteers (Austin, TX)

<https://www.austinchamber.com/education-talent/k-12-initiatives>

Austin, Texas invests in high school students to help prepare them for success in college, careers, or the military by assisting them with filling out federal financial aid forms to qualify for student loans. As part of the Austin Chamber's annual financial aid campaign to help families afford education beyond high school, staff recruit and train volunteers to help students and parents complete the FAFSA and TASFA forms. All volunteer trainings are held virtually. After training, volunteers help families fill out and submit forms at multiple area events.

ONE GASTON SHINES

Muskegon STAR! (Muskegon, MI)

<https://www.muskegon.org/events-programs/programs/muskegon-star/>

Muskegon STAR! is a program that provides information and resources that increase community knowledge for customer service representatives and other interested residents of the Muskegon, MI area. The program is structured as a one-time class that gives participants an overview of the community's history, upcoming events, local resources, new developments, and so on. Participants benefit from the connections they can make by participating in the program and receive a Muskegon STAR! pin and free admission to multiple local attractions upon graduation. The program can be especially value for hospitality, retail, and customer service teams who interact with the many visitors who are attracted to the region's lakefront along Lake Michigan.

Charlottesville Mural Project (Charlottesville, VA)

<https://charlottesvillemuralproject.org/>

The Charlottesville Mural Project (CMP) incorporates community perspectives to showcase the talents of artists locally, regionally, and abroad, while contributing to the cultural and visual vibrancy of the city. By involving the public in projects that visibly change the landscape of the city, the CMP helps instill a sense of pride and ownership in the community. Over 60 murals have been painted in neighborhoods across the city. Each one speaks to that specific location and involves local stakeholders in determining themes and images.

APPENDIX B: LIST OF REFERENCED REPORTS AND MATERIALS

Alliance for Growth, Greater Gaston Development Corporation, Poised to Prosper, 2014

Catawba Crossings Project Fact Sheet

Charlotte Area Transit System Transit Vision 2030 Transit Corridor System Plan

Charlotte MOVES Task Force Report, December 2020

City of Gastonia Strategic Plan 2021-2023

Gaston Business Alliance 2022 State Legislative Agenda

Gaston Business Alliance 2022 Talent Pipeline Management Handout

Gaston County 2022 Community Health Assessment

Gaston County 2035 Comprehensive Land Use Plan

Gaston County Economic Development Commission Overview, 2019

Gaston County Economic Development Competitive Positioning and Organizational Delivery Assessment, 2020

Gaston Economic Development Strategy Committee Report to the Gaston County Board of Commissioners, August 2019

Gaston Municipal Strategies Research April 2020

Gaston-Cleveland-Lincoln County Comprehensive Transportation Plan

Gaston-CLT-Airport Connected Economic Positioning Strategy

GGDC Alliance for Growth

Heartland 2050 Vision, 2014

Intergovernmental and Interagency Task Force on Homelessness in Gaston County Report to the Board of Commissioners, January 2021

