

Alliance for Growth

Greater Gaston Development Corporation

Poised to Prosper



Imagine a Gaston County where...

Career opportunities abound.

Technological advancements meet manufacturing needs.

Education is tailored to synchronize with job demand.

New roads open land to development.

Quality of life flourishes.

Companies clamor to expand and relocate.

It can all happen soon if we start working toward a brighter future now because Gaston County is Poised to Prosper.



A message from Bob Clay, Chair of the Board of Trustees, Greater Gaston Development Corporation

Thank you for taking time to learn more about the Alliance for Growth growth-planning initiative. While we are proud of the thousands of hours of volunteer time it took to produce this report, it means nothing unless we work together to implement the enclosed recommendations to accelerate Gaston County's growth and prosperity. Beginning in the New Year, we will shift our focus to the critical implementation phase. The investors in the GGDC invite your comments and involvement over the coming weeks and months. Please send me your ideas and suggestions for making Gaston County the top choice in the region for capital investment and jobs. Contact me at bob.clay@cbcmecca.com. See the full report on our website at gastondevcorp.com.

Poised to Prosper

Gaston County Today

Ideally situated along I-85, I-485 and U.S.321 in a dynamic region offering numerous quality lifestyles and business opportunities, Gaston County has a proven track record in attracting national and international investment. With a rich history steeped in manufacturing tradition, Gaston boasts a dedicated, capable workforce and convenient access to highways, rail and air transportation.

Offering close proximity to all the advantages of the bustling urban center of Charlotte, as well as to the mountain and coastal regions, make Gaston County well positioned for corporate and industrial/manufacturing site growth with an array of outstanding options for affordable family living.

Who Is Alliance for Growth?

The Alliance for Growth, a special task force commissioned by the Greater Gaston Development Corporation (GGDC), has assembled a blue-ribbon panel of local business leaders to develop plans for a prosperous Gaston County. This report serves as a starting point for elected and corporate leadership to guide Gaston County into a new era of prosperity.

Why Now?

Beginning in 2015, Gaston County must bring together the public and private sectors as never before. We must bring new focus on the need to add value to our county tax base. That means helping businesses expand and grow here is Job One. But, without the involvement and dedication of the private sector, local government alone will likely continue to be challenged by intense competition for business throughout the region. A survey of Gaston's recent employment growth shows that medical and related business is today one of the fastest growing sectors, according to the ongoing, 14 county regional cooperative initiative, Connect Our Future.

We must accept that Gaston County is in transition and must re-tool from the schoolhouse up in order to meet the needs and demands of a changing regional and global economy.

Such efforts have already begun thanks to the 105 Alliance For Growth volunteers who have worked toward developing findings and recommendations to help improve Gaston County's economic development competitiveness. Many viable suggestions were made that were not selected as recommendations, but have been captured in the full report for future consideration and action.

Alliance for Growth: Local Expertise

Recommendations by Alliance for Growth's committees together form a cohesive action plan to make Gaston a major player in the regional economic landscape. It is important to distinguish that these action items have been developed by civic and industry leaders from within the Gaston business and governmental communities and *not* by a group of outside consultants.

Local citizens representing a variety of disciplines have partnered to develop recommendations for the seven drivers of growth. Their proposals are the result of 120 days of meetings in separate committees, extensive research and data analysis and historical perspectives that relate to current conditions and future trends.

Together, this consortium has identified actions that we believe will create increased economic self-sufficiency between Gaston County government and its 13 municipal jurisdictions and will, when implemented, result in a stronger, more diverse property tax base and a wider array of employment opportunities for our citizens.

Now, we invite your review and comment on this body of work. Contact jhannon@gastondevcorp.com

Committees and Chairpersons

- Entrepreneur/Small Business: Don Harrison, Alliance Bank; Brad Rivers, Gaston College
- Workforce Preparedness: Reeves McGlohon, Gaston County Schools (Retired)
- Sites/Buildings/Infrastructure: Robert Browne, Beam Construction
- Growth Regulatory: Gerald Sosebee, Carolinas Design Group, PLLC; Mike Stanforth, Excel Engineering
- New/Expanded Recruiting: John Lowery, WealthPlan Financial
- Image/Marketing: Elaine Lyerly, Lyerly Agency; Andy Warlick, Parkdale Mills
- Transportation/Access: Regina Moody, Holy Angels Services; Tim Efird, Standard Distributors

Methodology

The seven committees proceeded with a focused, customized planning process that included:

- Data gathering
- SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis
- Priorities identification
- Recommendations

Image/Marketing

Finding: The Committee retained the market research firm Vocci to develop a questionnaire regarding perceptions of Gaston County, compose a list of participants and conduct a statistically valid poll of Mecklenburg County residents, Gaston County residents and 15 developers who are active in the region's economic growth. Results included:

- Most Mecklenburg residents have NO impression of Gaston County.
- More than 78% of Mecklenburg County residents have only "moderate" to "low" (or no) knowledge of Gaston County.
- 58% of Gaston County residents see their home county as "positive," 42% view Gaston County as "negative."
- The important developers' impressions of Gaston County are "negative."
- A lack of job opportunities is seen by County residents as a primary concern, while a lack of available, ready-to-sell land is the developers' largest concern.
- Gaston County's two publicly funded promotion organizations (Economic Development Commission and Travel and Tourism) target their marketing dollars out of the Gaston market. Therefore there is no "message" or "story" available to the Region or the State regarding the attributes of the County.

Recommendation: Convene key business and governmental leaders to: 1) identify the strengths of Gaston County; 2) create a strong and inspiring story about what and who we are; 3) craft a public/private funding model to extend for three or more years; and 4) implement, monitor, measure and report the effectiveness of the campaign.

Recommendation: In the spring of 2015, initiate relationship building activities to assist in delivery of the new Gaston "story."

Entrepreneur/Small Business

Finding: Most leaders in technology-driven, innovative companies wish to expand and improve their business model. Gaston's entrepreneurs are ambitious. They need a forum where they can communicate and exchange creative ideas beyond current networking efforts, ultimately creating jobs and regional economic growth.

Recommendation: Create a virtual hub for entrepreneurs. Local chambers of commerce can identify forward-thinking businesses and direct them to the hub to exchange ideas, services and recommendations.

Finding: The small business person feels over-regulated by municipal governments. While proper regulation for health and safety are necessary, small business persons often cite plans being dissected and analyzed by municipalities beyond code. This perception can be pervasive in dissuading other new businesses and relocations from considering Gaston County.

Recommendation: Municipalities within Gaston County should employ helpful, consistent and reasonable zoning and code oversight when working with new and expanding businesses within their jurisdictions.

Finding: Small business owners indicate a lack of readily available space, suitably located, to meet their needs. While there are numerous empty buildings throughout the County, the cost to rehabilitate that space for new uses is often prohibitive, effectively rendering them useless for small business needs. Gastonia, as well as nearby cities, have cooperated with the private sector to partner on commercial projects such as Lora Mill in Gastonia for residential and commercial adaptive reuse, and the NEXT Center in Greenville, S.C., for small commercial uses.

Recommendation: Evaluate current and future needs for market-driven, cost-effective facility to serve the current and future space needs.

Finding: Gaston County's location as central to the Charlotte Region is underdeveloped from a service industry perspective. With the spring 2015 completion of I-485, no part of the region will be more than a 45-minute drive from downtown Gastonia. Service industry recruiting would be a natural service of both Gaston Regional and Montcross chambers of commerce.

Recommendation: Gaston Regional and Montcross chambers of commerce should partner to organize and administer a region-wide campaign to recruit service industries.

Workforce Preparedness

Finding: There is a lack of appreciation of the value of education among Gaston County citizens. There is also a lack of awareness among students, parents and teachers as to the options available in the 21st century workplace and the skills and abilities needed to take advantage of these options.

Recommendation: 1) Introduce workforce readiness concepts at the middle school level involving business community participation; 2) create an awareness campaign that promotes the value of education; and 3) offer students and teachers exposure to apprenticeships and internships.

Finding: Gaston County Schools ranked 114th out of 115 North Carolina school districts in per-pupil spending. The district has approximately \$1,000 less per student to spend than does the average North Carolina school system. Given an enrollment of 31,000 students, that translates into a \$31 million annual gap between where the district is and the average per-pupil expenditure in North Carolina. Gaston College has faced significant state operating fund cutbacks in recent years and has seen its capital funding reduced by the county.

Recommendation: Gaston County Legislative Delegation support budgets in the 2015-2017 biennium that restore basic needs funds cut from state education budgets and make salary improvement for teachers and college faculty a priority. We urge the Gaston County Commission to increase financial support for local schools.

Finding: Matching prospective employees with available jobs is a difficult task. The Career Readiness Certificate (CRC) provides one avenue of measure to give employers an assessment of an individual applicant's ability to perform the duties and responsibilities of a specific job. The WorkKeys test used with the CRC program in Gaston County does not, however, provide information on the lack of "soft" skills (attendance, punctuality, getting along with others, etc.) that business leaders indicate create significant problems.

Recommendation: Develop an awareness program to provide businesses information about the CRC and its appropriate use in the recruitment and hiring process. Furthermore, the Committee recommends that use of the portion of the WorkKeys test that measures soft skills be explored.

Finding: Gaston College is the primary training partner of local business and industry. Anticipating industry needs is a primary role of the institution and the college has developed plans and has secured most of the funds for an Center for Advanced Manufacturing. It is imperative that this facility provide state-of-the-art equipment if it is to meet the short-term and long-term needs of Gaston County.

Recommendation: In order to make the Center for Advanced Manufacturing operational, the estimated \$450,000 needed to fully equip the facility be raised from both public and private sources.

Finding: One missing component in the array of options available to students in Gaston County is a vocational/technical high school that focuses on manufacturing and trade programs. Such a facility, if meshed with advanced training opportunities at Gaston College, would be an asset to the overall workforce preparedness effort in Gaston County.

Recommendation: The Gaston County Board of Education should explore an option of a vocational high school that focuses on manufacturing and trade programs and provides students with the opportunity to go directly into the workplace or to further their education in a community college or four-year college or university.

Finding: Because of the importance of workforce preparedness, the Committee believes that there should be an on-going effort to maintain focus on Gaston County preparing and maintaining a skilled workforce. It is imperative that business leaders, educators and government officials continually monitor how well the community is meeting its workforce needs and recommend needed changes.

Recommendation: Gaston County establish a permanent group (similar to the Spartanburg Academic Movement - SAM) to provide ongoing and collaborative leadership for workforce preparedness programs.

New/Expanded Recruiting

Finding: Recent activity in the manufacturing sector has absorbed most of the time of Economic Development Commission (EDC) staff. However, the committee believes other business expansion clients could be served as well, such as major mixed use and/or major retail projects.

Recommendation: EDC and staff make known its interest in facilitating all capital investments that will expand our tax base.

Finding: Gaston County has top business leaders with national and international reputations who are willing to volunteer on a stand-by basis to assist in “closing” the sale of manufacturing, office, retail and other capital investment projects. The EDC board could fulfill that aspect as could non-board business leaders.

Recommendation: The EDC board identify and train local leaders “closing team” to be available to meet with business prospects and sell the county on as-needed basis.

Finding: A vital part of the EDC relationship marketing is credibility and ongoing communications. Our business friends and associates must think of Gaston County in a positive way when opportunities arise. There is no better way to deliver a message than face-to-face.

Recommendation: The EDC plan and conduct key allies events beginning in spring 2015 to showcase Gaston County’s assets and enhance personal relationships for mutual benefit.

Finding: The County appoints local citizens to serve on the Economic Development Commission for specified terms. But, there is confusion about what responsibility the EDC board actually has and what is expected of the appointees. An engaged EDC board can add assistance and clout.

Recommendation: The EDC board’s leadership should meet with County management and the County Commission to resolve in detail the EDC board’s role and authority to oversee the programs and strategies of the County’s recruitment program.

Growth/Regulatory

Finding: The current version of the Unified Development Ordinance (UDO) was first adopted by the City of Gastonia, Gaston County, Bessemer City and Lowell in 2008 and 2009. Other municipalities continue to manage growth with their own set of rules. However, in the current economy, the committee believes a more systematic review of the UDO could accelerate growth.

Recommendation: Initiate a complete review of the UDO involving key staff, elected officials and representatives of the building development industry.

Finding: Most public employees approach their assignments with a professional and helpful attitude. However, there are examples at municipal levels in which staff and appointed boards will require changes to plans above and beyond ordinance requirements in order to gain approval. Sometimes these amendments appear arbitrary and often result in delay and increase costs of the project, and can endanger the project altogether.

Recommendation: City and/or County regulatory staff and appointed boards should require proposed projects to meet code and refrain from preferential negotiations beyond adopted requirements.

Finding: County staff recently created the Small Business Project Manager position, serving as an internal advocate. The County staff needs an upgrade in technology, especially software, putting the county building inspection function on the same tech platform as the City of Gastonia.

Recommendation: City and County continue to improve their customer service focus and include vital technology needs in their FY 2015-16 budget plans.

Finding: The City of Gastonia convenes all department heads (or representatives) each week to offer free, informal development plans review. This process creates a virtual “one stop” and provides a clear picture of what is needed to prepare the application for fast approvals. The County should consider starting a version of this Technical Review Committee, resulting in a positive interface experience between the County and applicant.

Recommendation: Gaston County Building Inspections Department initiate their own version of an informal, regularly scheduled technical review group to meet with applicants, explain the required process and facilitate quick approvals.

Sites/Buildings/Infrastructure

Finding: Gaston County’s elected leaders and staff have considerable expertise in recruiting manufacturing clients. But in terms of marketing Gaston County, the Committee believes the time is right for the County and EDC to conclude the free land policy. Available revenues could be directed to a new policy to work with private land owners to assist in bringing their land to market via strategic infrastructure investments and improvements.

Recommendation: The timing is right for the county to evolve current land purchase/donated policy to a public/private model to expand available privately owned sites.

Finding: Developers have understandable concerns about Gaston County’s views on growth and therefore many choose to invest in Cabarrus, Union, Iredell, Lincoln, York or Lancaster, where governmental signals are clearer and they believe their investment risk is lower. This analysis leads the Committee to urge public and private interests to encourage developers to invest in Gaston County. A spec building in the 75,000- to 100,000-square-foot range or more would change the dialogue about investment prospects here.

Recommendation: The public and private communities should immediately work with land owners and developers to construct one or more spec buildings.

Finding: Several years ago, EDC staff analyzed a number of privately owned lands coupled with an estimate of development costs required to make those properties “sell-ready” or certified by North Carolina Department of Commerce. This analysis should be updated. When this research is complete, a data bank of land/prices should be created and distributed widely to local and regional developers.

Recommendation: The EDC should update development costs needed to obtain “certified” sites status on selected properties and to create, maintain and make available this information available.

Finding: There are a number of large tracts that would make excellent sites for manufacturing, office or flex space provided water and sewer were available and the sites were better serviced by access roads. Large tracts exist along U.S. 321 North and west of N.C. 16. Both sites would greatly benefit from new interchanges at strategic points.

Recommendation: The Two Rivers Utilities and the City of Gastonia should create a county-wide infrastructure plan to provide water/sewer and reasonable access to parts of the County with highest job development potential.

Finding: Poor image, or a lack of an image, directly affects how business clients and developers perceive Gaston, which affects their investment decisions. Therefore, the County’s image **does** matter. We know pride exists throughout and for Gaston County. Let’s begin telling the real story of Gaston County as soon as possible.

Recommendation: The private and public interests in a better image of Gaston County should initiate a marketing and public relations campaign aimed at targeted markets, companies and individuals.

Finding: Gaston County’s location on I-85 — the main commerce corridor between Washington, D.C., and Atlanta — is greatly underutilized. Gaston County is also favorably located to I-485, I-77, U.S. 321 and I-40. Additionally, it is Charlotte-Douglas International Airport’s closest neighbor. With these abundant transportation assets, Gaston has the ability to appeal to both the automotive industry here (Daimler), just 70 miles west in Greenville/Spartanburg (BMW and Michelin), to Charleston, S.C. (Boeing, Bosch) and Greensboro (HondaJet) as a potential site for their current/future supplier networks or for distribution to the North, South and West.

Recommendation: The EDC should develop a business case for Gaston County to serve supplier needs of the large manufacturers, especially in the automotive and aerospace industries, such as BMW, Michelin, Daimler, Boeing and HondaJet.

Transportation/Access

Finding: Gaston County has no widely supported transportation vision. Such a vision would provide a fact-based approach to making local interstate, bridge and road needs more widely understood and supported. The Committee feels strongly that while there are “flagship” needs in the County, there are other less-publicized needs as well. The process of developing transportation vision would involve continuing demand for road improvements and provide much-needed advocacy to and with elected officials.

Finding: Despite the failure of the proposed Garden Parkway project, there remains a growing interest in seeking local and state approval to fund another bridge across the Catawba River near Charlotte-Douglas International Airport to facilitate economic growth, safety and access.

Finding: In spite of a dwindling state and federal dollars for highway construction and improvement, there remains a need for improvements to existing roadways and new roads to provide access to potential business and industrial sites. This will require alternative funding strategies, such as York County’s “Pennies for Progress.”

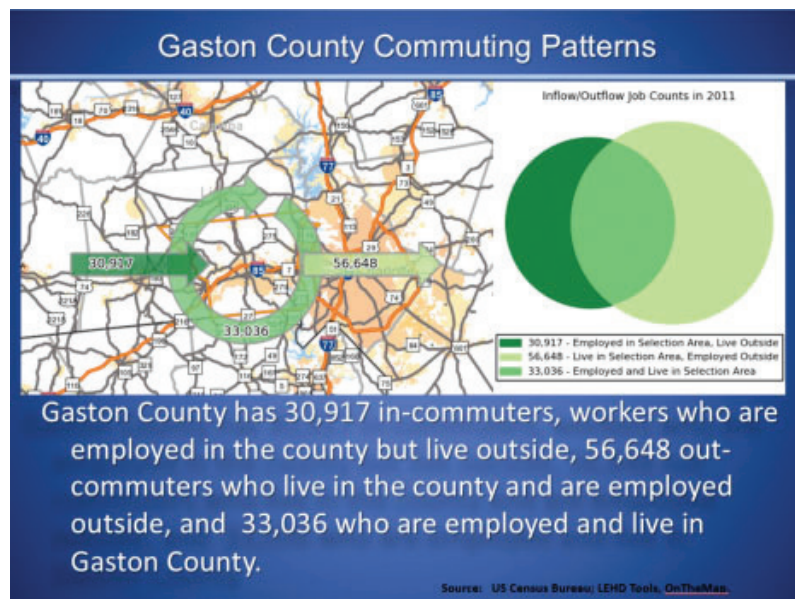
Finding: Good transportation planning and investment leads directly to economic growth. Two examples of lack of planning are U.S. 321 and N.C. 16. There are large tracts of developable land on both four-lane divided highways, with easy connections to I-85 and to I-485, but there are no direct access points to either tract. Commuters in and out of Gaston County drive past these sites to work elsewhere.

Recommendation: All Gaston municipal and County governments authorize a county-wide transportation study to update current and projected data and prioritize needs.

Recommendation: Develop a fact-based case for an additional bridge across the Catawba River between Gaston County and Mecklenburg County and organize community support for the concept.

Recommendation: Gastonia and other municipalities in conjunction with Gaston County government seek legislation to authorize a sales tax referendum for roads.

Recommendation: Business and government should work through the Gaston-Cleveland-Lincoln Metropolitan Planning Organization to promote two new interchanges on U.S. 321 and N.C. 16 in Gaston County.



To Sum It Up:

Image/Marketing:

- Develop strong Gaston County story.
- Secure public/private funding for three years.
- Implement and monitor marketing campaign.
- Activate personal relationships in region and with North Carolina leaders.

Entrepreneur/Small Business:

- Create a virtual hub where Gaston County business leaders exchange ideas, services and recommendations.
- Municipalities rework zoning ordinances to be more consistent and reasonable.
- Evaluate current and future needs for market-driven, small business incubator.
- Recruit regional service industry to locate in Gaston County.

Workforce Preparedness:

- Design workplace needs and education awareness for middle school, including work experiences for students/teachers.
- N.C. Legislature and Gaston County restore cuts in funding for basic needs and increase support for County schools.
- Promote value of Career Readiness Certificate (CRC) to local businesses, and add soft skills testing.
- Develop public/private funding strategy to complete Gaston College's Advanced Manufacturing Center.
- Explore adding vocational/technical high school as student career alternative.
- Establish permanent group to collaborate with education leaders on needs/trends in workforce preparedness.

New/Expanded Recruiting:

- Continue manufacturing recruiting and recruit other significant investments.
- Create business/political leaders "closing team" to meet clients as needed.
- Conduct allies appreciation event in spring 2015 to unveil new Gaston image promotion.
- County redefine role of EDC Board to oversee and enhance business recruiting program.
- Expand contacts within automotive and aerospace industries in Carolinas.

Growth Regulatory:

- Initiate a comprehensive review of the Unified Development Ordinance (UDO)
- City of Gastonia and other County municipalities require capital investment projects to meet existing ordinance requirements with no additional conditions.

- City and County continue progress toward best customer service and ensure all their regulatory departments utilize same technology platform.
- Gaston County Building Inspection Department build on new customer service function to facilitate applicants' rapid departmental approvals.

Sites/Buildings/Infrastructure:

- Assist private property owners to obtain "certified site" status by defraying required application fee.
- EDC/County should evolve current free land incentive to new policy of extending infrastructure to private sites.
- Update private land inventory and development costs and post on EDC website.
- Two Rivers Utility as well as City of Gastonia and Gaston County governments should collaborate on infrastructure plan to open major sites/acreage in county.

Transportation/Access:

- Produce new 20-year Gaston Transportation Vision and priorities.
- Gastonia and Belmont work jointly to assemble fact-based case for an additional bridge across the Catawba River.
- Gastonia and other interested municipalities confer with Gaston County and Legislative Delegation to permit referendum on a sales tax for roads.
- Promote new interchange access on North U.S. 321 and N.C. 16.
- Organize a Highways/Roads advocacy group to build community support.

Special Thanks:

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Also, the committee chairs and co-chairs Don Harrison, Brad Rivers, Regina Moody, Tim Efird, Reeves McGlohon, Robert Browne, Elaine Lyerly, Andy Warlick, John Lowery, Gerald Sosebee and Mike Stanforth. Also, Ann Hoscheit, Rick Houser, Ted Hall and Wes Bumgardner as well as Donny Hicks, Devin Swindall, Malissa Gordon of the EDC and Walter Israel and Emily Carpenter of Travel and Tourism, GGDC special assistant Joyce Hannon, copy editor Andrew Warfield and the 105 volunteers who served many hours on our committees. Consultants Carroll Gray and Bill Millett of Gray and Associates facilitated the many committee meetings, research and report preparation.