

GASTONIA 2025 COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

Introduction

What is a Comprehensive Plan

The Comprehensive Plan is a collection of text and maps that sets forth goals and objectives for guiding future land use and development in the City of Gastonia and the planning area. The goals define the vision of the City and the objectives provide a way to achieve the vision. The plan addresses many issues, such as transportation, economic development, neighborhoods, environmental quality, parks and recreation, and community character, to name a few.

The plan uses these goals and objectives to define how land throughout the City should develop in the future and identifies what areas are best suited for development and which should be left in their natural state. It determines where to locate new housing, industry and commercial uses and how each of these can effect our natural environment. It also considers how the community should look and discusses the importance of how a building is sited, the use of focal points and gathering places, and the relationship between appearance and community pride. It must be emphasized that unlike a zoning ordinance, the plan is not law and does not impose any special regulations on any person or their property. It is a tool, albeit a powerful tool, that provides many benefits to the community, including benefits to existing and future residents and those wishing to invest in our community. Planning Commissioners and City Council members rely upon the plan as they make decisions

on Gastonia's growth and development. In addition to providing land use recommendations for consideration, the plan serves as a guide for consistent decision making. Citizens rely on the plan when determining where to live, work, and make property investments. The location of future roads, industries, and commercial areas are critical to these important decisions. Planners use the plan to assist citizens and the development community by communicating the City's preferred growth patterns and preferred type of growth, prior to investment related decisions. Having a solid comprehensive plan also communicates to the world that "the City of Gastonia has vision, focus and a plan of action." For those wishing to make investments in our community, the efficiency, stability, and strength communicated by the comprehensive plan are important.

WHY WE PLAN?

To manage Gastonia's future wisely we need a shared vision of what we want to attain for ourselves, our children and our future generations – and then direct our actions toward achieving that vision. This vision must seek to balance a wide array of community needs, objectives, and realities. It must be both idealistic and practical - reflecting our highest ambitions, while taking into account the social, economic, political, geographic and environmental realities we are likely to face over the next twenty years and beyond. The comprehensive plan is a tool to achieve this goal. It serves as a long-range vision of what we want the City of Gastonia to become, as a tool for making decisions to achieve that vision, and as a specific program of action for reaching the stated objectives.



WHY DO WE NEED TO UPDATE THE PLAN?

Gastonia adopted its first Comprehensive Plan, *CityVision 2010* in 1995. Since 1995, the City has successfully implemented many of the goals and objectives outlined in the plan. This plan has helped to support successful projects such as the “sphere-of-influence” agreement with Dallas, the Avon and Catawba Creeks Greenway, and the Gateway Corridor Overlay Zone. New small area plans that reflect changes in growth and policy directives, such as the Southeast Plan and the Smyre Plan were written and adopted (since 1995) and these plans have been incorporated into the *Gastonia 2025* plan. The world is constantly changing and the future as we saw it in 1995, was based on different realities. Issues that were never imagined take center stage and new policies must be written and adopted to address them. Populations shift, industries change and new residents with new needs move in. Additionally, technology has improved and we can produce a more user-friendly plan with new maps to better illustrate the vision. All of these points make it necessary and possible to re-evaluate who we are and how we want to accommodate our growth.

HOW WILL IT AFFECT ME?

The Comprehensive Plan may affect the way key properties in your neighborhood and across the City are developed during the coming years. Because it guides how and where we will grow, the plan influences the future look and feel of our community. The plan will be used to guide investment in new public facilities like recreation centers and water and sewer extensions. The way we plan our city can have a tremendous impact on our lives. For example, we can decide that only certain types of businesses should operate and certain types of housing be built in specific neighborhoods. We can decide where additional green space, playgrounds and parks are desirable or develop guidelines that foster small, local businesses or help attract more stores and restaurants to the business districts nearest residential neighborhoods. Being proactive and planning for these quality of life issues may directly influence the value of your home and how you live your life. The many citizens that have participated in this process have helped determine the future of the City of Gastonia.

If you don't know where you're going, you might end up someplace else."

- Casey Stengel





THE PLANNING AREA

When planning for any city's future, assumptions must be made about future annexation, utility coverage areas, transportation improvements, and private development. In order to get an accurate population projection and to better address the specific needs of different parts of the City, this plan is based upon a *planning area*, which includes both the City proper and the surrounding areas.

The planning area is broken down into eight sectors: Northwest, Northeast, East, Southeast, Southwest, Central, Garden, and Crowders. The sectors are based on census tracts, which generally follow major roads or stream corridors, current city limit lines or existing annexation agreement boundaries. The planning area could also

be called the functional city; that is, the region in which decisions made in Gastonia affect growth, character and quality of life. As businesses and people relocated to Gastonia, they tend to look at the functional city rather than the municipal city. The maps in the plan show both the current City limits and the 2025 planning area. It should be noted that the boundary of the planning area does not imply areas to be annexed or areas to be included in the City's extraterritorial jurisdiction. Rather, it is a defined area that can be studied in a systematic manner that will lead to meaningful planning and decision making. Due to the City's growth during the past ten years, the possibility of a new toll road through the southern part of the County, and updated annexation agreements, the 2025 planning area is much larger than the 2010 planning area and includes two additional sectors to the south: Garden and Crowders.

THE VISION

In the year 2025, Gastonia is a great place, with great people and great promise, with a strong and diverse economy, an efficient and fiscally responsible government, a vibrant central city, a high quality environmentally sustainable transportation system, and diverse neighborhoods.

We have a high quality of life, characterized by the efficient delivery of public services combined with land use planning that promotes sustainable development principles. We have a strong sense of community and are knowledgeable about our cultural and historic resources, and scenic assets which we strive to preserved and enhance. We have outstanding recreational amenities with linkages to a comprehensive system of greenways and trails, bike paths and walkways; and livable streets. The Gastonia of the year 2025 confidently navigate regional and global challenges pertaining to the national economy, housing, energy and sustainability. We work hard to implement our comprehensive plan, understanding that implementation is a collaborative effort which requires innovative public/private partnerships.

ORGANIZATION OF THE PLAN

This plan is organized in two major sections. The initial section lays out the context of Gastonia and this plan, with the chapters on Gastonia's community setting, growth & change, and development issues.



The second section includes eleven chapters covering specific planning subjects each with a series of goals and policies that encompass the future visions

for the City. Each chapter describes the background and trends on a particular subject, describes what has changed since the adoption of CityVision 2010, and outlines new directions, policies, and programs. Each chapter includes a set of major issues, objectives to address the major issues, and specific tools that may be used. Objectives are statements of policy, recommended changes to the City's ordinances, or priorities for City programs. Tools are actions that could be taken to implement the objectives. The Chapters are:





Housing & Neighborhoods

Neighborhoods are the building blocks of overall community development. They are diverse, dynamic social and economic entities with unique characteristics, which are recognized by residents of both the neighborhood and community at large. A healthy sustainable neighborhood is one that has physical, social, and economic sustaining elements that meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. The decision to live in this community will depend on the availability of an adequate supply of decent housing that provides a variety of choices to meet the needs of a single individual or a family regardless of what those needs are. Thus, Gastonia's vision recognizes the need to preserve and create sustainable neighborhoods and enhance the quality of life and livability in Gastonia.



Public Utilities & Community Services

The City will provide adequate, reliable, and cost effective services that meet demand and are consistent with development policies and plans; and will achieve these services through safe, environmentally sensitive and cost efficient methods.



Economic & Human Development

Economic growth and prosperity is vital to the quality of life of the residents of Gastonia. A strong, healthy economy will ensure that the community is sustainable and continues to thrive as an attractive place to live, work, and play. This chapter recognizes that as the economy transitions, Gastonia must work collaboratively to attract a more diverse economic base and develop opportunities to strengthen and train our workforce.



Open Space, Parks & Recreation

Recreation has been a part of Gastonia's community life since the City's inception. Gastonia's textile mills sponsored athletic and recreational programs and area churches and service clubs also sponsored recreational programs. In addition, the City's public parks and recreation facilities have greatly contributed to the social fabric and quality of life in Gastonia. A quality municipal parks and recreation system is vital to the growth and development of the City. It also provides the community with substantial health and economic benefits to the community.





The Center City

Together, the downtown and its surrounding neighborhoods defines an area known as the “Center City”. This area helps define who we are as a city and is an overall measure of the economic health of the community. Without a strong and vital Center City, the City of Gastonia would be just another sprawling amorphous suburb of Charlotte. This Chapter of the Comprehensive Plan serves as the long term source of ideas and inspiration for actions that will be aligned with and mutually supportive of the vision and principles noted herein. It also recognizes the significant advantage a strong core provides in a highly competitive economy. A vibrant Center City symbolizes smart growth at its best, fighting regional sprawl and building a sustainable economy and community.



accessibility. These community focal points build upon existing issues and opportunities to create mixed use places that encourage walking, cycling, and use of transit, which can also serve as a source of civic pride and economic vitality within the community.

Regional Planning & Interjurisdictional Coordination

The City of Gastonia is committed to working in collaboration with regional partners to develop a regional framework for planning on all levels. The City further recognizes that it does not operate in isolation and that the activities within its corporate boundaries impact other jurisdictions within the region and is committed to further examining regional planning issues for the Greater Charlotte Region.



Franklin Boulevard Corridor

The Charlotte metro area is expected to add nearly 400,000 people over the next 20 years. With downtown Gastonia a relatively short 20-30 minute commute to Uptown Charlotte and the airport, Franklin Boulevard offers an authentic and historic urban environment that, if positioned well, could attract a sizable percentage of that regional growth to capitalize on revitalization efforts.

The vision for the Franklin Boulevard corridor is to create places of distinction at key points along the corridor that enhance its character, strengthen the City’s economic vitality and expand opportunities to attract residents, visitors and workers by increasing



Environmental Quality

The Environmental Quality element provides a policy basis for the protection and enhancement of Gastonia’s natural environment. While the Environmental Quality element contains policies that relate directly to many aspects of the natural environment, the concept of environmental protection and preservation is integrated into all aspects of the Comprehensive Plan. Environmental stewardship is a core value of this Plan, and it plays an integral role in guiding how the City accommodates growth and provides services. The City can protect environmental quality by ensuring its land use policies, codes, and standards are up to-date with contemporary best management practices; that it is compliant with state and federal environmental laws and administrative rules; and that it leads by





example in employing environmentally sound and sustainable practices in its municipal operations.

Community Appearance & Identity

Community appearance and identity is a thread running through the entire Comprehensive Plan. Every section of the Plan deals, in some manner, with the face Gastonia presents. The Comprehensive Plan seeks to establish and maintain a positive community identity.



Land Use & Development

Gastonia seeks to develop with an appreciation for sensitive environments, long term quality of life, economic efficiency, and community character. Therefore, the application of smart growth principles is indispensable for Gastonia, both in implementing the Comprehensive Plan and preparing for its eventual success. This Plan recognizes and supports the principles and goals of smart growth.



Transportation

An effective transportation system is critical to the economic and social well being of the community. The City of Gastonia recognizes the importance of developing an efficient transportation system that is environmentally sensitive and fiscally responsible, while being responsive to the community's needs, remaining consistent with land use plans, and fostering economic vitality. The goal is to achieve a balanced system that meets the needs of people of all ages and abilities, while also meeting the needs of businesses, industry, and area employers.



The Planning Process

In January 2002, the City began the process to update the *CityVision 2010* plan. The new plan would be called *Gastonia 2025*. The process consisted of a two-pronged approach: (1) Formulate 8-12 “key guiding principles” to become the plan’s foundation as it was written, and (2) write the plan (which includes goals and objectives to achieve the key guiding principles). The steering committee, a subcommittee of 30 people from throughout the community and representing various City committees has been involved with the process, receiving technical support from the Planning Department.

PHASE I – FORMULATING THE KEY GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Three brainstorming and information gathering activities were used to help the community envision how Gastonia should grow and develop: a symposium series, a steering committee photo assignment, and a community character survey.

A **symposium series** invited experts from the region and state to discuss various planning and development issues. Each symposium focused on a planning and/or development related topic and included multiple speakers. Symposium topics included:

- Smart Growth
- Walkable Communities
- The Transportation and Land Use Connection
- Open Space Planning
- Neighborhood Design Trends
- Center City Development
- The Dollars and Sense of Smart Growth.

The second visioning exercise included a **photo assignment** given to members of the steering committee. The purpose of this exercise was to encourage the group to take notice of current conditions and visualize how Gastonia could develop in the future. Committee members carried a camera while running errands, commuting to work, or visiting friends. They examined the built environment around them and took pictures of things that worked well and things that did not. Photos were grouped into categories and through group discussion participants identified the root problems or key community character issues in each photo. Next, they offered suggestions on correcting problems and building a sense of place. After all the participants visited each photo station, they used dots to select the recommendations that they believed would be most effective in correcting the problem.

The final exercise was the **community character survey**. Utilizing the concept developed by A. Nelessen Associates, who has administered hundreds of surveys for cities and towns across the nation, the City of Gastonia used a survey and photo exercise to identify issues and concerns in the community and provide relative weight to each. The Planning Department hosted seven (six evening and one Saturday afternoon) public input sessions. In addition, invitations to conduct the survey for civic groups such as the Jaycees, an Optimist Club and a book club were received and accepted. In the end, 128 individuals participated. Seventy-three percent of the participants lived within Gastonia’s city limits and the average number of years lived here was 26, with 16 people having lived in Gastonia for 50 or more years.

The survey included a questionnaire to gather the participant’s ideas about general development concepts. Participants responded to such things as their land use priorities, preferred revenue source for public improvements, and essential downtown amenities. In addition, to the



questionnaire, a visual survey allowed participants to rate images based on whether or not they were appropriate for the “future Gastonia.” Survey participants viewed 160 images from the following nine categories: residential, commercial, mixed-use, industrial, office, public realm, facilities, parking and street types. Each image was rated on a scale of negative 5 to positive 5 based on the question, “is the image you are viewing appropriate or inappropriate for Gastonia.” The average rating and standard deviation of each image was calculated and the intensity of negative or positive reactions to the various images provides direction for future planning and development. Lower standard deviations indicate a strong agreement between survey participants, therefore, images with high average score and low standard deviations provide clear direction for the future. The Community Character Survey helped to stimulate conversation and awareness about the built environment. Survey results were used to develop goals and policy statements within the Comprehensive Plan.

From these three public input exercises (the symposium series, the photo assignment, and the community character survey) eleven key guiding principles emerged and were adopted by City Council in February 2004. These principles served as the framework for the plan, with the goals and objectives of each section referring back to the key guiding principle. Each principle does not function alone; rather in many cases, they overlap. For instance, when writing the goals and objectives for transportation and land use planning, the principles of growth patterns, regional planning and environmental quality were considered.

PHASE II – DEVELOPING THE GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The second phase of the planning process consisted of writing the actual plan, including the goals and objectives to achieve the key guiding principles. Beginning in August 2004, the steering committee held at least two meetings to discuss each principle. During these meetings, the Planning Department used a consensus building method to determine the issues surrounding each principle area, providing the information needed to develop the goals, objectives and tools for the plan. During the second meeting on each topic, the steering committee reviewed, amended and approved all the goals, objectives and tools. The steering committee finished this segment of work in August 2005.

The next step in the process was to address future land use in light of the goals established by the committee. To better address the specific needs of different parts of the City, staff conducted seven community meetings during October and November 2005 to address land use issues



within the eight sectors. Each meeting consisted of small group discussion and larger group discussions related to land use in that particular sector. Comments from the neighborhood meetings were combined and related to a future land use map.

To solicit further input from the public, staff mailed Over 115 people responded to a utility bill insert sent in August 2006. These interested citizens were added to a master list and contacted each time a draft chapter was placed on the City's website. Citizens were able to view and print the information and provide comments to staff via the web or by contacting staff directly.

After the goals, objectives and strategies were drafted, staff began writing the individual chapters of the plan. The chapters are based on the wealth of information collected during earlier parts of the planning process. As each chapter was developed the drafts were placed on the web for public comment. Upon the completion of drafting each chapter, the formal adoption process began.

ADOPTION & IMPLEMENTATION

Gastonia 2025 was adopted by Gastonia City Council on XX and it is both a statement of policy and a guide to future decision-making. Unlike a zoning ordinance, the plan is not law, and it places no specific restrictions on any person or their property.

The plan is expected to be revised over time, with minor changes made on an annual basis, and a thorough update every five years. The Development Services Department will also prepare an annual implementation guide, which will be used to monitor the progress in implementing the plan.

We hope you find the plan both informative and helpful.

