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# GASTONIA 2025: OUR PLACE IN THE FUTURE

## Key Guiding Principles





# KEY GUIDING PRINCIPLES

## Executive Summary

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 our city to become, as a tool for making decisions to achieve that vision, and as a specific program of action for reaching the stated objectives.

City Council adopted Gastonia's first comprehensive plan, CityVision 2010, in July 1995. Divided into three sections, the plan begins with Gastonia's history, then discusses ten specific planning subjects and finishes with an in-depth plan for the six sectors of the City. It incorporated and built upon many previous small area and corridor plans. Since its adoption, the City has successfully implemented many of the goals and objectives, such as a "sphere-of-influence" agreement with Dallas, the new Avon and Catawba Creeks Greenway, and the Gateway Corridor Overlay. New small area plans that reflect changes in growth and policy directives, such as the Southeast Plan and the Smyre Plan were written, adopted and incorporated into the current plan.

In January 2001, the City began the update of the current comprehensive plan. The process to develop the new plan, *Gastonia 2025: Our Place in the Future* has two phases. The first phase was to formulate 8-12 "key guiding principles" that will become the plan's foundation as it is written. The second stage is writing the actual plan, which includes goals and objectives to achieve the key guiding principles. 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.

Planning staff organized three brainstorming and information gathering activities to help the community envision how Gastonia should grow and develop. A symposium series invited experts from around the city, region and state to discuss various planning and development issues. The second visioning session was 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. The final exercise was the Community Character Survey. The survey consisted of two sections. The first section was a questionnaire to gather the participant's ideas about general development concepts. The second section was a visual survey that required the participants to rate how appropriate various images would be for the future of Gastonia.

From these three sessions, eleven key guiding principles emerged. These principles will lead the development of the plan when writing the goals and objectives of each section. Each principle does not function alone; rather in many cases, they overlap. For instance, when writing goals and objectives for transportation and land use planning, the principles of growth patterns, regional planning and environmental quality is also considered.



# The Key Guiding Principles

## 1. GROWTH PATTERNS AND DIRECTIONS

Over the next twenty years, the City will stimulate a development pattern that will allow it to operate as a fiscally responsible entity.

## 2. ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

To ensure long-term development, Gastonia of the future will focus to develop a diverse economic base.

## 3. HUMAN RESOURCES DEVELOPMENT

Gastonia will work with local leaders to help carry out the goals of state and county agencies to educate and train the community.

## 4. REGIONAL PLANNING

Gastonia will promote collaboration among communities within the county and the greater region to manage growth and development to ensure a high quality of life for the residents of the City and the region.

## 5. UTILITIES AND URBAN SERVICES

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

## 6. TRANSPORTATION AND LAND USE PATTERNS

The City will establish policies and land use patterns that create a balanced, fiscally responsible and environmentally sustainable transportation system, utilizing all available modes of transportation, to efficiently move people.

## 7. ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY

Gastonia will continue to lead and cooperate with the region to establish policies that preserve and enhance our natural environment.

## 8. OPEN SPACE, PARKS AND RECREATION

Gastonia of the future will have an abundance of parks and open spaces with connecting greenways that accommodate the variety of recreation needs of a growing and diverse population.

## 9. NEIGHBORHOODS

New and existing Gastonia neighborhoods will encourage a sense of community, offer a variety of residential alternatives, and provide easy access to daily activities.

## 10. THE CENTER CITY

Through public and private efforts, the center city will become the primary location for new amenities within the City, featuring a variety of retail destinations, cultural and civic activities, and quality housing opportunities, and will evolve into an energetic destination for our growing population.

## 11. COMMUNITY APPEARANCE AND IDENTITY

Gastonia's visual appearance will demonstrate its community pride with economically vibrant and visually pleasing corridors, gateways, commercial areas and neighborhoods. Gastonia will guard and build upon its assets to retain its distinctive character and enhance its community identity.

# Key Issues and Guiding Principles – In Depth

## GROWTH PATTERNS AND DIRECTIONS

The City of Gastonia continues to grow in both population and geographic area. During the 1990's, our population increased 21%, and through annexations, the city's physical size went from 30.40 square miles to 46.06 square miles. A growing population creates a demand for additional residential and retail development. The residential component of this growth has been mostly in the form of low density single family housing. New commercial outlets that have spread along major corridors quickly followed. This land use pattern has contributed to increased traffic congestion, the elimination of natural areas, and increased municipal costs. A positive growth rate is necessary for fiscal stability, therefore, Gastonia will continue to welcome new residents both within its current boundaries, and within any newly annexed areas. With a finite amount of land available for growth, policies and agreements are necessary to protect our future growth areas and to ensure an expanding revenue base for years to come. **Over the next twenty years, the City will stimulate a development pattern that will allow it to operate as a fiscally responsible entity.** Emphasis will be placed on the redevelopment of existing properties, new development where services already exist and more cost-effective development styles: thus allowing the City to efficiently serve a larger population.

It has been a long time goal that all parts of our city should enjoy growth. With the size and influence of Charlotte, this will be difficult without the continued interjection of public policy and private investment. Economic forces pull development towards the southeast, while disinvestments push development away from the central and western portions of the City. The enactment of an aggressive code enforcement plan to improve the westside's visual appearance and the construction of a new sewer outfall to allow additional

development are two examples of public policy that have affected growth patterns. As a result, new suburban style housing developments have begun to pop up along Carson and Oates Roads. Additionally, the Wal-Mart planned for the abandoned Nichols site is the first large commercial development for this area in a decade. Many acres of Gastonia's most scenic land remain undeveloped in the City's western portion and the opportunity still exists to capitalize on this asset. The adoption of and compliance with effective plans and policies, will help this area develop fiscally sustainable, with coordinated land uses and with the continuation of some of Gastonia's most beautiful vistas.

## ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

The textile industry built, grew, and sustained Gastonia for many years. Because of the available labor force, infrastructure and cultural climate Gastonia easily added other industries to its employment mix over a 40-year period. However, even with these additions the principal employment sector continued to be heavy industry. As these heavier industries shut down or became less labor intensive, they no longer supplied the strong employment base for the community nor the tax and utility revenues to the city. Gastonia will continue to support its existing businesses while recruiting new ones. However, for the future Gastonia will take a broader perspective to how it defines economic development. Without restructuring its own economic base, Gastonia could evolve into a bedroom community of Charlotte. **To ensure its long-term economic prosperity, Gastonia of the future will focus to develop a diverse economic base.**

Previously the formula for business recruitment played heavily on a city's water, sewer and road systems. While all of these remain important, today's knowledge based economy has added two other elements to the mix - quality of life and education. Many location recruiters give high scores to amenities such as entertainment, recreation, and cultural events. Gastonia should be proud of its current facilities such as the Schiele Museum of Natural History and Planetarium, nearby Daniel Stowe Botanical Gardens and Crowder's Mountain. Local leaders should emphasize all these points of interest and activity during business recruiting. Future amenities to



add to the mix are performing arts groups, a vibrant downtown and new recreational facilities. Sufficient education and training are the foundation for the knowledge based economy, requiring businesses looking for new locations to consider the educational level of the potential work force. Not only do recruiters want a well-educated work force, but they also appraise a community's ability to provide lifelong learning opportunities. Streamlining the development approval process can also help the business community and support entrepreneurship. Competing with Charlotte, Hickory and other communities for new businesses is a challenging responsibility, which requires an aggressive marketing effort. A concerted, sustained and financed effort to promote Gastonia and to reinforce a positive image is essential.

## HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT

Skilled and flexible workers are a very important asset for companies and communities. Competitive firms need workers who can easily adjust to new product ideas, who can be trained in new technology, and who can produce more efficiently. According to **Gaston 2012 – Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy**, the single biggest challenge facing our community is the relative lack of preparedness of the workforce to cope with the new economic realities. When comparing the educational measures of Gaston County with national and state levels, Gaston has a lower percentage of adults with college degrees, lower levels of high school attainment, lower mean SAT scores, higher dropout rates, and lower per pupil spending on K-12 education. Human resource development is primarily the function of the county and state, carried out through their formal education and social services programs. The city's role is to ensure their policies are consistent with and supportive of the goals of the agencies whose mission is the development and training of our human capital. **Gastonia will work with local leaders to help carry out the goals of state and county agencies to educate and train the community.**

## REGIONAL PLANNING

The City is a member of the Charlotte-Gastonia-Concord Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) - linked together by transportation, economies

and natural environments. As the region continues to grow and political boundaries become less important, it is critical to remain active in regional planning efforts. Many organizations exist to provide a forum to discuss the region's interests such as the Gastonia led Charlotte Regional Alliance for Transportation (CRAFT), the Centralina Council of Governments' Sustainable Environment for Quality of Life (SEQL), and Voices and Choices. All of these organizations have been very productive in their education, discussion and planning efforts. Statewide legislation to provide for regional land use coordination would improve the implementation process and further the success of these groups. Without that mandate and without a commitment from all regional players it is difficult for each entity to remain steadfast to the region's goals. Nevertheless, we can continue to share information and coordinate with our regional partners to make the best use of our limited resources.

Gastonia also participates within a smaller regional entity – Gaston County and the other local municipalities. The City took part in the County's recently adopted land use plan and Gaston 2012 – a Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy. It also functions as the lead agency of the Gaston Urban Area Metropolitan Planning Organization, which has been successful in protecting right of way corridors for countywide future transportation projects. **Gastonia will promote collaboration among communities within the county and the greater region to manage growth and development to ensure a high quality of life for the residents of the City and the region.**

## UTILITIES AND URBAN SERVICES

The City provides and maintains public services and facilities such as sewer, water, parks, fire, and police. It is also a regional provider of water and sewer services to other Gaston County municipalities and northern York County, SC. These facilities and services expanded as our population increased from both new construction and annexation. In the recent past, to meet the wants and needs of the community the City built a Police Station, four Fire Stations, and two award-winning projects, Martha Rivers Park and the Avon and Catawba Creeks Greenways.



Over the past decade, the strongest demand for new construction has been in the southeast. However, this is also the area with the least amount of available sewer capacity. Regardless of the availability of water and sewer lines, development will occur where the demand is, even if this results in more wells and septic tanks. The design of new public facilities such as water and sewer should support the land use proposed by the Plan. Additionally, the Plan must consider the cost of water and sewer services when recommending future land use. **The City will provide adequate, reliable, and affordable 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.**

## TRANSPORTATION AND LAND USE PATTERNS

The overall movement of vehicles across the city is well managed. Previous bond packages have provided the funding for construction of new cross-town roads in the growing southern section. However, over time the established land use pattern of low density, single family developments disconnected from retail, work and school will lead to congestion. It can be argued that this configuration, in conjunction with the strong personal preference of individual automobile use and the lack of transportation alternatives, has caused the vehicle miles traveled (VMT) to increase more than three times the rate of population growth. Improving and expanding transit options along with land use patterns that support public transportation will help reduce this trend. The future Garden Parkway is an example of a new road that will provide an opportunity for cross county transportation, economic development and congestion relief for I-85. However, without a proactive development policy, one-acre residential lots built on septic tanks, tucked in between, but not connected to other land uses, will surround the Parkway. The key is to balance the road's functionality with its potential for needed economic development.

In 1990, 64,000 Gaston County residents worked within the county. Ten years later, even with a larger population, only 56,000 Gaston County residents worked within the county. That equates to a 13% decrease of people who both lived and worked within the county. During that same period 39% more of Gaston County residents commuted to Mecklenburg County. Chances

are a large majority did so using I-85. While this corridor currently offers one of the best commuting times to Charlotte, this will not continue. One solution is transit. Whether in the form of bus rapid transit or rail, a future corridor should be determined, preserved and developed appropriately. **The City will establish policies and land use patterns that create a balanced, fiscally responsible and environmentally sustainable transportation system utilizing all available modes of transportation, to efficiently move people.**

## ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY

An aerial tour of Gastonia would reveal the City's clean air, flowing streams and lush tree canopy. While these natural amenities still dominate the landscape, our, and the greater region's, sprawling growth pattern and increasing vehicle miles traveled (VMT) have put our environment at risk. Although transportation accounts for a significant portion of emissions, it is also where the most improvement has taken place since 1970. Federally initiated technological changes such as reformulated gasoline, more efficient engines, on-board diagnostic systems and catalytic converters have reduced emissions. However, the rate of reduction may slow because of the increasing VMT. To further reduce emissions on a local level, we can promote carpooling, walking and bicycling. Encouraging new land use patterns such as compact mixed use and transit oriented developments may also result in fewer vehicles miles traveled and better air quality. Another environmental concern is the health of our waterways. The increasing amount of impervious surfaces such as parking lots, rooftops and roads has worsened our stream conditions, making the protection of our watersheds critical. Finally, acres consumed by development have reduced forests and grasslands and eliminated many natural habitat corridors. Our land, air and water are our most precious resources and we must take care of them. **Gastonia will lead and cooperate with the region to establish policies that preserve and enhance our natural environment.**

## OPEN SPACE, PARKS AND RECREATION

Our moderate growth rate does have its benefits. Not only can we learn from others, but we also have large tracts of land still available for open space



preservation and future recreation needs. These large tracts, combined with Crowder's Mountain State Park, existing local parks, potential greenways along our creek corridors, nearby Daniel Stowe Botanical Gardens, and recent conservancy acquisitions all provide the elements for Gastonia to be known as the "Green Community." Creating linkages and connections to these places will draw attention to them, make their use easy and help ensure their success. If marketed properly, these assets could make us stand out throughout the region, attracting people and businesses to Gastonia, and making Gastonia a great place to visit. **Gastonia of the future will have an abundance of parks and open spaces with connecting greenways that accommodate the variety of recreation needs of a growing and diverse population.**

## NEIGHBORHOODS

Our current growth pattern has resulted in indistinguishable, isolated and auto-dependent neighborhoods. Neighborhoods built without sidewalks and public gathering spaces have reduced the opportunities for interaction and have eroded our sense of community. Changes made to the Zoning Ordinance encourage new developments to install sidewalks and open space amenities. Another way to create a sense of community is through well-planned developments that utilize smart growth principles. Ideas such as: a variety of housing styles, a mixture of land uses, walkability and connectivity, and compact building design all help foster strong and socially connected neighborhoods. According to the 2000 census, there are 25,891 households within the Gastonia city limits. Of those, only 5,391 or 20.8% of the households contain the traditional married couple with children. That leaves 80 percent of the households as some other mix – single, divorced with children, empty nesters. No single type of housing unit can serve the varied needs of today's diverse households. Yet, single family houses still dominate new residential construction in Gastonia. **New and existing Gastonia neighborhoods will encourage a sense of community, offer a variety of residential alternatives, and provide easy access to daily activities.**

## THE CENTER CITY

Work is underway to redevelop the downtown, its surrounding neighborhoods, and nearby mill villages. Recent projects include listing the Loray Mill Village on the National Register of Historic Places, the formation and strong presence of the Gastonia Downtown Development Corporation, and the renovation of the historic county court house. New businesses have begun to locate in the downtown area and City Council passed ordinances allowing outdoor dining and sidewalk vending. However, the central city continues to lack basic retail services and is yet to be a vibrant place where people congregate. This weakens our ability to attract new businesses, frustrates the current populace, and harms the community image and identity. A large residential population is an important element of a central city's success and is often the catalyst new retail development demands. The current housing stock lacks opportunities that appeal to all social and economic demographic groups. An attractive alternative to typical suburban development, that emphasizes "move-up" housing, would return folks to the center city and discourage additional flight. The success of Gastonia is closely tied to the success of downtown and its surrounding older neighborhoods. However, it has proven to be very difficult to compete with the residential and retail forces of suburban style development. New City sponsored programs and policies that make infill development more financially attractive than new greenfield development will encourage the renovation of the center city. **Through public and private efforts, the center city will become the primary location for new amenities within the City, featuring a variety of retail destinations, cultural and civic activities, and, quality housing opportunities, and will evolve into an energetic destination for our growing population.**

## COMMUNITY APPEARANCE AND IDENTITY

Through zoning code compliance and the efforts of many City departments, the visual image along major corridors has improved. However, acres of junk cars and abandoned or underutilized strip shopping centers still lead newcomers into the city and harm Gastonia's image. Since a good appearance is a reflection of a community's pride, Gastonia should strive for well-designed roadways that have ample landscaping, sidewalks that are in good repair, and attractive signage. Commercial centers need well-



maintained buildings and parking lots that provide pedestrian friendly access and internal connectivity. Community appearance is also important at the neighborhood level. The City's Code Enforcement Department has made great strides in removing junk cars and repairing or demolishing neglected homes. Additionally, the programs of Keep Gastonia Beautiful help educate and promote the importance of community appearance. Design guidelines that encourage innovative developments with focal points and gathering spaces can help to create a pleasing, livable community. Gastonia's visual appearance will demonstrate its community pride with economically vibrant and visually pleasing corridors, gateways, commercial areas and neighborhoods.

For many years, Gastonia derived its image and sense of place from the mills for employment and the downtown for entertainment. With both of these in decline, Gastonia is at a loss to define its community identity. Like many others, we are becoming a city of chain stores with their accompanying commonplace franchise architecture. Our current development pattern does not support a sense of community. It lacks gathering places, walkability, focal points and identities. Yet, we have many special attributes to be proud of, natural areas such as Crowder's Mountain State Park, historic buildings such as Loray Mill, and strong neighborhoods such as Gardner Park. **Gastonia will guard and build upon its assets to retain its distinctive character and enhance its community identity.**

# Appendix

## 2002 Symposium Series

### SMART GROWTH

This symposium focused on smart growth as it affects communities across North Carolina. Bill Duston, Planning Director of Centralina Council of Governments presented a slide show developed by the NC chapter of the American Planning Association. It discussed the consequences of our current growth pattern on traffic, air quality, loss of green space and growing infrastructure needs. The program presented eight principles of smart growth and how each could shape how we grow. Next, Tancred Miller discussed the current NC legislative plans to address smart growth issues. Mr. Miller, the North Carolina Coordinator of Sierra Club's Solution to Sprawl campaign, encouraged listeners to organize grass root efforts locally, as support from Raleigh will be slow. Dennis Rash, Executive-In-Residence at UNCC's Center of Transportation Policy, discussed the impact of smart growth on the private sector. Using two projects he was closely involved with, Fourth Ward and Gateway Village, he demonstrated how smart growth principles such as mixed use and infill developments can benefit developers because of lower infrastructure costs.

### WALKABLE COMMUNITIES

The second symposium included four presenters who spoke about the importance of including other modes of transportation, most notably walking, when planning communities. Mary Newsom, Associate Editor at The Charlotte Observer, discussed what most pedestrians currently encounter as they travel without a car. Obstacles such as sidewalks that end for no apparent reason, few easily accessible destination points, sidewalks in poor condition and crowded by overgrown landscaping, and too little separation between the sidewalk and passing traffic all discourage those wanting to or having to travel as a pedestrian. Susan Bailey of the Gaston County Health



Department followed with a presentation of the health problems associated with engineering physical activity out of our daily lives. As the number of vehicle trips and their distances have increased the opportunity to be physically active has decreased. This has contributed to an increase in obesity, diabetes and asthma related disease. The final two presenters, Mike Bush of Connect Gaston and Steve Hancock of the City of Charlotte, spoke of their organization's efforts to encourage other modes of transportation. Mr. Bush discussed his experience with the grass roots organization to educate and promote the importance of building Gastonia's first greenway. Mr. Hancock reviewed Charlotte's bicycle transportation plan, which establishes policies and institutional framework, sets forth design issues, and indicates necessary roadway improvements.

### THE TRANSPORTATION AND LAND USE CONNECTION

At the next symposium, State Senator David Hoyle, spoke of the future of transportation funding in North Carolina. The senator discussed the statewide financial crisis and its impact on the general fund and transportation funding. Harrison Marshall, a planner with the Statewide Planning Branch of NCDOT, followed with a discussion of how transportation and land development patterns affect the fundamental character of communities. Our highway and auto oriented transportation system combined with conventional single use zoning tends to create a development pattern commonly known as sprawl. Mr. Marshall recommended that creating affordable, livable and sustainable development patterns and transportation networks by integrating land use and transportation planning will help communities avoid sprawl. Next on the agenda was Bob Cook, of the Charlotte Area Transit System. Mr. Cook discussed the land use policies necessary to make transit possible in Gastonia. He provided examples of transit supportive developments and boldly stated that for transit to be financially successful, the community must accept higher densities in areas designated as future transit corridors. This symposium's final speaker was Burt Tasaico a project administrator with NCDOT. Mr. Tasaico reiterated the importance of linking land use and transportation, and offered the concepts of better access management and improved environmental stewardship as methods to enhance the transportation system as a whole.

### OPEN SPACE PLANNING

The fourth symposium, held at Camp Rotary near Crowder's Mountain, focused on open space planning. Vicki Bowman of UNCC Urban Institute provided an overview of open space planning. Her presentation included the benefits, methods, and major players of open space protection. Her discussion included a review of recent planning initiatives such as the Catawba River Basin Easement Fund and the Strategic Regional Open Space Framework. David Fogarty of NC Cooperative Extension Services added even more of a Gaston County perspective with his discussion of the South Fork Watershed Study, which gathered information about soil erosion, water intake locations, wetlands and impervious surface in the watershed. Staff mapped and analyzed the information to highlight and prioritize areas for land protection. Mr. Fogarty also spoke of Quality Natural Resources Commission (QNRC) priorities such as erosion and sediment control, Phase II stormwater rules and wetland protection. The final speaker of the evening was Warren Burgess, Planning Director for the Town of Davidson. To stabilize the downtown and minimize the amount of land consumed by sprawl type development, Davidson passed a new open space protection ordinance. Administration of the new ordinance required the town to catalog its vacant land into primary and secondary conservation areas. The classification criteria were determined during a weeklong charrette that included a detailed land survey of trees, water, grassy areas, and slopes. The result was a map of areas to be set aside as open space and areas allowed for development.

### NEIGHBORHOOD DESIGN TRENDS

The purpose of this symposium was to discuss current trends in urban and suburban development. It began with an overview of new urbanism by David Walters, professor of architecture at UNCC. Mr. Walters emphasized the importance of reflecting on cities of the past, putting people first when designing communities, and considering both form and function in the design process. He also stated that a true new urbanist development includes a mixture of land uses as well as social-economic groups, pointing out that new communities such as Vermillion and Baxter offer little opportunity for



the lower income market. Next, Brad Davis of LandDesign spoke of his experience creating a plan for Charlotte's Second Ward. The vision was to transform a stark, largely institutional area of over 100 acres into a livable and memorable urban neighborhood through a mixture of land uses, diversity of architecture and housing types, unique infrastructure and a hierarchy of open spaces. The goal of the plan was to support a diverse population of differing ages and socio-economic backgrounds through a community-based process. The final presenter of this evening was James Traynor of Clear Springs Development Company, the developer of Fort Mill's Baxter. One of the company's key planning beliefs was that growth does not result in the destruction of things you love. Instead, they chose to balance growth with environmental stewardship, which resulted in community livability. This 1033- acre development includes a mix of residential, retail, medical, civic, recreation and open space uses.

## CENTER CITY DEVELOPMENT

Center City Development symposium featured two speakers, Jack Newman of the Division of Community Assistance and Brian Borne of Gastonia Downtown Development Corporation (GDDC). Mr. Newman gave an overview of the Main Street Approach developed by the National Main Street Center of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. The goal of the Main Street program is to improve all aspects of the downtown or central business district, producing both tangible and intangible benefits. Improving economic management, strengthening public participation, and making downtown a fun place to visit are as critical to Main Street's future as recruiting new businesses, rehabilitating buildings, and expanding parking. Building on downtown's inherent assets -- rich architecture, personal service, and traditional values and most of all, a sense of place -- the Main Street approach has rekindled entrepreneurship, downtown cooperation and civic concern. The Main Street methodology addresses the following four areas of concern and combines activities in these areas to develop a community's individual strategy for redeveloping downtown; organization, promotion, design, and economic restructuring. Mr. Borne followed with an overview of the past, present and future of Gastonia's downtown. He listed a number of companies new to the downtown over the past year and the amount of economic investment they have infused into

the community. He offered an overview of the work plan formulated by the various GDDC committees, which has since been completed and presented to City Council.

## THE DOLLARS AND SENSE OF SMART GROWTH

The final symposium was a discussion of the costs of smart growth for both the developer and the municipality. Speaking that night were Bob Clay of Pharr Yarns, local developer Jake Terzo, and Al Sharp of Centralina Council of Governments. Mr. Clay began the evening with a financial comparison of smart growth and traditional development. He mentioned some of the difficulties that encountered when dealing with the conflicting goals of a municipality and a developer. One example he offered involved a Charlotte neighborhood that installed small-scale decorative lighting along a collector street, which also functioned as the development's rear border. The City then installed tall cobra style lighting to better illuminate the street. Not only is this not aesthetically pleasing, but the developer essentially wasted thousands of dollars on unnecessary lights. Jake Terzo followed with a discussion of how smart growth principles work for a small developer. Mr. Terzo discussed the various smart growth principles utilized by his proposed development on Armstrong Circle. For Terzo and the City, this compact, infill development did not require new city services and allowed him to build up-scale homes on unproductive vacant land in an already established neighborhood. His representative elevations included homes with small setbacks and large front porches creating a strong sense of place. Al Sharp offered another perspective of the financial costs of growth: those that impact the municipality. He stated that we as a society have a faith and dependence on growth. We believe that bigger is better. The cost of this growth, especially if on a city's outskirts, is an increase in service delivery needs, which equates to more money spent on water, sewer, police and fire. Mr. Sharp stated that to be successful there must be a balance between public and private investments and a strong political will.



## The Photo Assignment

The second visioning session was 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. They 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. Each photo included text to describe the sentiment captured. Planning Department staff grouped the photos into thirteen categories and organized a group discussion at the Loray Mill, facilitated by Dr. Garry Cooper from Appalachian State University. The participants answered three questions for each of the categories. The first question was to identify the root problems and the keys to community character found in each photo. Next, they offered suggestions to correct the problems and how these would help build a sense of place. Finally, they circled words or phrases from the picture's corresponding text that strongly represented the image. After all the participants visited each photo station, they used dots to select the recommendation that they believed would be most effective in correcting the problem. Staff totaled the dots and reported the results for a group discussion. The following are the top three recommendations from the thirteen categories.

### QUALITY OF LIFE/COMMUNITY PRIDE/LOCAL TREASURES

- ◆ Focus preserving efforts on areas as well as individual buildings [prominent intersections (South and Franklin), whole neighborhoods (Firestone, Smyre)] (10)
- ◆ Develop corridor design standards for all major gateways (7)
- ◆ Partner with PNC to create civic center in Loray Mill or other place in downtown (6)

### DESIGN

- ◆ Re-use and rehabilitate where possible existing residential and commercial stock that has historic merit, character, or individuality. (15)

- ◆ Develop standards/DBJ for community appearance (8)
- ◆ Move parking to rear of buildings (7)

### ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

- ◆ Adaptively reuse buildings and preserve architectural character (12)
- ◆ Encourage diversification of economy (tech, industry, arts) (10)
- ◆ Encourage through: tax incentives, secretary of interior standards, façade grants (7)

### RESIDENTIAL

- ◆ Promote/develop stable/diverse neighborhood, with housing opportunities for all socio-economic groups (10)
- ◆ Encourage housing downtown (8)
- ◆ Encourage adaptive re-use (7)

### DOWNTOWN

- ◆ Develop design guidelines preserving architectural character that require certain actions (8)
- ◆ Establish satellite school/college in downtown (UNCC, Gaston College, etc) (8)
- ◆ 4 step program to revitalize downtown (6)

### COMMERCIAL USE

- ◆ Encourage mixed/sharing of parking for uses who have different operating hours. Design parking lots as pedestrian/transit friendly and put focus on people not vehicles. Design parking lots for average volume not for Christmas shopping season (8)
- ◆ Encourage community uses that support neighborhood needs and demonstrate good design (7)
- ◆ Encourage/promote/finance mixed use/rehab development (6)
- ◆ Develop pedestrian-friendly shopping areas – maybe downtown (6)



## CODE ENFORCEMENT ISSUES

- ◆ Create “investment zone” to encourage residential investment and prideful ownership (11)
- ◆ Timely code enforcement to prevent further disrepair (8)
- ◆ Enforce current standards (8)

## TRANSPORTATION/TRANSIT

- ◆ Promote development that reduces dependence on vehicle and relies on alternative modes of transportation (8)
- ◆ Require traffic plan before development (7)
- ◆ Encourage higher density/mixed use along major corridors to make transit work in the future (6)

## LANDSCAPING

- ◆ New developments get tree credits -old trees in lieu of new planting takes into consideration cost to consumer while protecting the environment. Drawbacks – expands staff and impacts tax dollars (16)
- ◆ Educate public / encourage utility companies appropriate tree pruning techniques (6)
- ◆ Preserve trees in subdivision process (4)
- ◆ Adopt a tree preservation ordinance for mature trees (4)

## OPEN SPACE

- ◆ Urban growth boundary (13)
- ◆ Impose design requirements regarding open space on developers (8)
- ◆ Fund open space (5)

## SIGNAGE

- ◆ Encourage signage standards for individual neighborhoods/districts based on the history/aesthetics/character (14)

- ◆ Define policy, follow it, do not revise every month (9)
- ◆ Remove old signs (6)

## RECREATION

- ◆ Create master plan network of pedestrian/bicycle routes/paths/trails (13)
- ◆ Build “pocket” parks in downtown Gastonia with cascading fountains like Thomas Polk Park in uptown Charlotte (6)
- ◆ Update outdated recreational facilities (6)

## SIDEWALKS

- ◆ Require wide planting strips adjacent to street so that pedestrian feels safer (10)
- ◆ Require sidewalks within shopping centers (6)
- ◆ Make sidewalks sufficiently wide with trees and grassy buffer next to street (5)



## Community Character Survey

The final session was the Community Character Survey. Planning Department staff utilized the concept developed by A. Nelessen Associates who has administered hundreds of surveys for cities and towns across the nation with issues and concerns similar to Gastonia's. The survey consisted of two sections. The first section was a questionnaire to gather the participant's ideas about general development concepts. The participants responded to such things as their land use priorities, preferred revenue source for public improvements, and essential downtown amenities. The second section was a visual survey where the participants rated how appropriate various images would be for the future of 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," with positive being appropriate and negative not appropriate. After compiling the survey forms, the average rating and standard deviation of each image was calculated. 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 department hosted six evening and one Saturday afternoon public input sessions. 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 respondents top three priorities for new development are single family housing, bike and greenway trails, and parks and open space. Mixed-use buildings ranked a close fourth, which is affirmed by the 92%, who agree that different land uses can be compatible to one another if good design is incorporated into the development. Further, eighty-two percent agree that the design criteria should be a part of city code. Any new commercial development should be distributed evenly across the city, kept away from natural area and be

located close to neighborhoods. The least supported development pattern was to locate all new retail and office development along New Hope Road. According to the participants, areas that need improvement are Gastonia's visual appearance, local schools and traffic. When asked how to pay for future public improvements 25% of the applicants were in favor of general tax increases, 22% supported user fees, and 15% would not support any property tax increase.

The participants viewed images of single family homes, townhomes and apartments. The highest rated single family neighborhoods and townhomes featured street trees, adjacent green space and sidewalks. A common element in the lowest scoring images of this category was the lack of sidewalks. Multi family developments with large parking lots and minimal design features rated low while those with internal courtyards and landscaping scored high. Commercial areas that included water features, decorative window displays, and brick crosswalks received the highest score while auto-oriented, strip commercial centers with large parking lots were poorly received.

The participants rated the public areas with broken or incomplete sidewalks and large blank walls lower than areas with spray fountains and benches located amongst homes and retail outlets. Commercial parking lots with internal sidewalks scored higher than those without. Survey participants preferred small shopping centers with parking on the side rather than parking in the front. In residential areas, streets lined with trees scored a strong positive while those without scored a high negative.

While the ratings and scores may not be surprising, the survey accomplishes two main goals. It adds a degree of preference and dissatisfaction and it quantifies what may have been considered intuitive. Planners can include elements from highly scored images in a Design Guidelines Manual or developers can consider the local community's preferences when designing a new subdivision or commercial center. Typically used early in the planning process, Community Character Surveys help stimulate conversation and awareness of the built environment and garner public input. The next step is to use the survey results to develop goals and policy statements within the Comprehensive Plan.

