



GASTONIA 2020

COMPREHENSIVE PLAN



I ntroduction

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.

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.

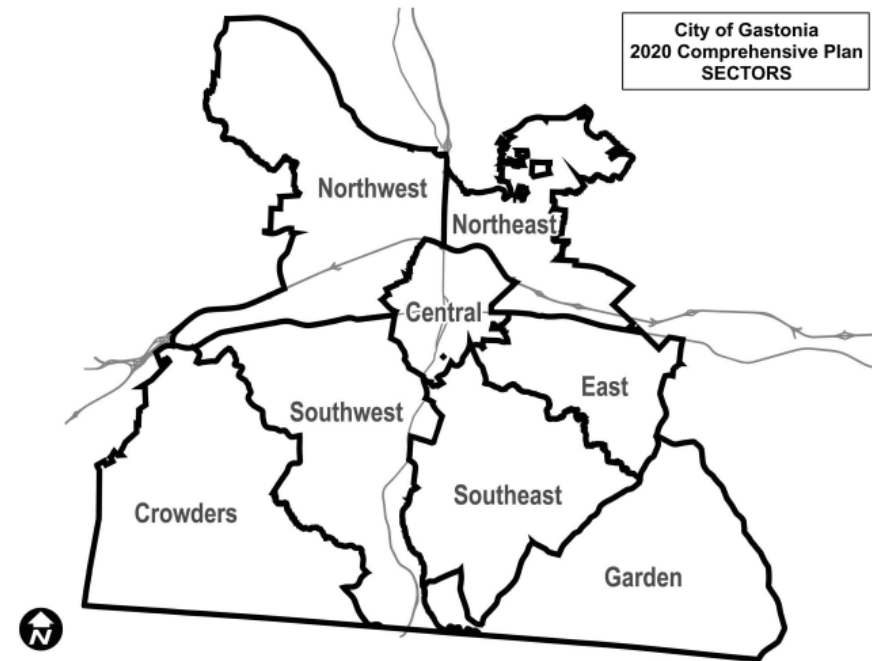


WHY DO WE NEED TO UPDATE THE PLAN?

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 2020* 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.



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 2020 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 2020 planning area is much larger than the 2010 planning area and includes two additional sectors to the south: Garden and Crowders.

ORGANIZATION OF THE PLAN

The plan includes three major sections. The initial section reviews the context in which we are planning by looking at characteristics of the past, present, and future population and population trends. What are the attributes of our region and how do we fit into the broader regional economy? How has our population grown in the past and how fast are we expected to grow in the future? Who lives in Gastonia now and do they also work within the City? What are the attributes of our population? Are they homeowners? Have they graduated from high school or college? What trends are expected over the next twenty years? By understanding these basic characteristics, the city is better able to plan for the needs of future populations and take actions now to prevent future problems.

The second section includes eleven chapters covering specific planning subjects:

- Growth Patterns and Directions
- Economic Development
- Human Resources Development
- Regional Planning
- Utilities and Urban Services
- Transportation and Land Use Patterns
- Environmental Quality
- Open Space, Parks and Recreation

- Neighborhoods
- The Center City
- Community Appearance and Identity

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 final section of the plan contains the eight sector plans. The sector plans include land use and development policies for the smaller geographic areas of the City, addressing issues that may be unique to a particular sector.

The Planning Process

In January 2002, the City began the process to update the *CityVision 2010* plan. The new plan would be called *Gastonia 2020*. 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.

THE KEY GUIDING PRINCIPLES

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.

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, 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.

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.

Individual chapters of the plan were drafted based on the wealth of information collected during earlier parts of the planning process. 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.

What's Next?

Our goal is to have all draft chapters placed on the web for public comment. In the meantime, the steering committee will convene to review the future land use map recommendations gleaned from the community meetings. A second set of community meetings will be held to outline the draft plan and then a draft plan will be presented to the City Council.