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Growing Gaston

LOCAL STRENGTHS, GLOBAL SUCCESS

Plans & People – Vision & Action

Gaston County shines as a destination for relocating or expanding businesses – or for those just getting off the ground. Despite our current pandemic-related challenges, we are poised for more success due to the addition of experienced professionals to the staff of the Economic Development Commission and partner organizations including the Greater Gaston Development Corporation. A recent assessment of the county’s opportunities has ushered us toward an opportunity to design and create a bright future for Gaston County.

In the fall of 2019, the County contracted with nationally-recognized economic development consultant Ted Abernathy of Economic Leadership, LLC, to conduct an Economic Development Competitive Positioning and Organizational Assessment. Ted was an ideal choice, not only because of his professional credentials, but also because he was born and raised here in the county.

[Report findings](#) were presented to the Board of Commissioners and community on November 12, 2019. County Manager Dr. Kim Eagle formulated a [workplan](#) based on that report just weeks later.

Foremost is the task of having the right people in the right seats to accomplish the work. To that end, the County has filled vacancies in the county organization with experienced and enthusiastic professionals.

- Matt Blackwell has been named Economic Development Administrator. Matt brings extensive experience, having started his career in Gaston and later serving as the leader of ED efforts in both Cleveland and Rutherford Counties. His skills in strategic planning and community collaboration will help propel the county forward.
- The addition of Adam Gaub as Public Information Officer supports the goals of improved communication and branding.

Matt Blackwell will convene a countywide, inter-agency team to create the county’s first Economic Development Action Agenda, which will reinforce the collaborative spirit that has fueled the work so far. The Action Agenda will represent a shared understanding among community partners about the “whats”, “whos”, “hows”, and “whens” of a bold drive toward economic success. With a one- to two- year time horizon, the Agenda will lay out milestones for important decisions and action steps to position the county to take best advantage of economic opportunity.

Improving communication among economic development professionals across the county, and between those professionals and citizens, is another key goal. This quarterly publication is part of an expanded effort to share stories that pull back the curtain on economic development recruitment, strategy, and measures of success. Your feedback on this first edition, and your hopes for future editions, are welcome and can be sent to Adam.Gaub@GastonGov.com.

While COVID-19 has impacted workplan timeframes, the wide-ranging ramifications of the virus make a concerted, collaborative economic development effort all the more critical for Gaston County, its existing businesses, and its residents. Already, County Government has looked to innovative solutions for businesses, placing \$500,000 into a bridge loan program to help small businesses stay afloat during these incredibly challenging times.

As the community moves forward in this time of uncertainty, county staff and partners will continue to implement the economic development workplan set in place before the pandemic, including the development of a 20-year Community Vision that sets the County on a path for quality of life for all residents.



FOREIGN DIRECT INVESTMENT HELPS GROW GASTON COUNTY ECONOMY



- Gaston County has emerged as a location of choice for international, owner-occupied, single tenant advanced manufacturing facilities. In their [winter 2019 issue, *Southern Business & Development*](#) recognized Gaston County as one of the top small and medium sized markets in the 15-state southern region of the United States for international business recruitment.
- Foreign direct investment (FDI) has accounted for twenty of the forty-one most recent economic development projects landed by the Gaston County EDC and includes both existing industry expansions as well as new recruitment projects. A few of the industry sectors represented by FDI include plastics, chemical and metalworking firms. Turkey, Israel, Germany, Belgium, Spain, Italy, and Australia are just a few examples of the home countries from which these companies originate.
- These international firms have invested over \$370 million along with the creation of over 1,000 new jobs during the past several years that consistently have higher average annual wages than the County's average. In addition to advanced manufacturing operations, about half of the twenty firms have engineering and headquarters operations located at their Gaston County facilities.
- Gaston County's proximity to Charlotte Douglas International Airport and Interstate 85 are major factors in the success of securing FDI in our communities. *Southern Business & Development* reports that "these international firms prove that Gaston County successfully competes for new and expanding global businesses."
- *Source: Southern Business & Development – Winter 2019 Issue*

Graduating Into a Promising Future

Gaston County Economic Development Commission promotes and supports collaboration between the business community, Gaston County Schools and Gaston College on programs to meet existing industry needs while preparing future graduates for the workforce. Through partnerships between the Gaston County Schools Career and Technical Education (CTE) program and the business community, students apply, interview, and are selected for internships in various fields of work.

For a few high school graduates, the culmination of such collaborative efforts is realized during a [Career Signing Day](#), an event that is more typical for student-athletes. Organized by the Gaston County Schools CTE program, this annual event represents a major step toward a promising career for students. During Career Signing Day select students who have participated in local internships with business and industry, as part of their CTE curriculum, are joined by their family and business leaders to

officially sign, in a public ceremony, a Certificate of Achievement and signify their intent to work for a local company following graduation.

Gaston Superintendent of Schools Dr. Jeffrey Booker stated, “The Career Signing Day program brings attention to our efforts to connect students with local businesses and make them aware of career opportunities right here in Gaston County. We are very proud of the students who accepted jobs with local companies, and we are confident that they will be successful.”

Through the CTE program, students gain valuable knowledge in a particular career field and have opportunities to earn industry-recognized credentials, which gives them an advantage as they enter the workforce after high school. Dr. Booker added, “We sincerely appreciate the partnership we have with the local business community. Working together, we are able to equip our students with the knowledge and skills they need so they can get a great job right out of

high school.”

In August 2018, the Gaston County Career Signing Day was recognized in the *New York Times*.

Career Signing Day began with the graduating class of 2018 and involved four students and three businesses. Business and industry leaders, as well as and students, have realized the value of the program and participation increased to eight local employers and twelve graduates in 2019. This academic year has been equally as promising for students and local businesses. Unfortunately, internships were suspended following the stay-at-home orders issued as a result of the COVID-19 and a date for Career Signing Day 2020 has not yet been announced.

If you are a local business or industry leader and have interest in participating in this program, please contact Brett Buchanan, Gaston County Schools, Director – Career and Technical Education, at (704) 861-2496 or bcbuchanan@gaston.k12.nc.us for more information.

Source: www.gaston.k12.nc.us



The Inaugural Career Signing Day in 2018 involved four students and three businesses and continues to grow.

Keeping a Competitive Advantage

The Gaston County EDC has continuously advocated for the development of business parks to create land availability and essential infrastructure to support modern business requirements. Economic development consulting firms such Strategic Location Group LLC, Ady International and McCallum Sweeney all recommend a product mix of buildings and prepared sites to maintain the community's competitiveness for economic development projects.

Through the support of the Gaston County Board of Commissioners, the Gaston County EDC has been responsible for the physical development of a number of industrial and office parks throughout the County.

Most of the available sites within these parks have been developed and are occupied by business and

industry resulting in the need to create more available product.

The EDC staff has worked for a number of years to identify land for future business parks and are working in collaboration with the Gaston County Board of Commissioners to acquire and develop additional product including more than 410+ acres for business and industrial development near the towns of Dallas and Cherryville.

Diverse, shovel-ready sites are one of the most critical factors in business location decisions and are considered an essential tool for local economic development programs targeting companies across a broad range of business sectors.

For more information on available buildings or sites, please visit Gaston.org, or call the Gaston County EDC at (704) 825-4046.

