



PROVIDED BY TECHWORKS OF GASTON COUNTY

*TechWorks, an incubator that will locate in downtown Belmont, is just one of the projects Gaston County leaders have underway designed to transform the county into a high-tech center that is already attracting businesses from all over the world.*

# Remaking Gaston

**M**ost of Gaston County's 15 incorporated cities and towns still boast a unique, Southern friendliness with walkable downtowns, locally owned businesses and a charm not usually found in larger metropolises. Separated from Mecklenburg County by the Catawba River, greater Gaston is a haven where the Norfolk Southern railroad whistle can be heard at dusk, parades fill Main Streets on holidays and hikers escape to Crowders Mountain State Park to climb The Pinnacle, at 1,705 feet.

But change is occurring in Gaston County. It's happening in the east, along the Catawba, where a technology headquarters is coaxing businesses into the digital age. And on the north side in Bessemer City, where international businesses are planting American roots. It's moving in college classrooms, as students study advanced curriculums geared specifically toward local jobs, and at a construction site in the center of downtown Gastonia, soon to be a retail and entertainment complex that officials hope will draw people and pocketbooks to the inner city.

"How do we create a destination? That's the key to making a project work," says Mark Cramer, executive

director of the Greater Gaston Development Corp., which is instrumental in bringing TechWorks to Belmont and the Franklin Urban Sports and Entertainment (FUSE) project to downtown Gastonia.

"Contrary to popular belief and opinion, no one says they need to go to one place," says Steve Nye, marketing director of the Gaston County Economic Development Commission. "They concentrate on where they need to be to serve the market."

Through a variety of avenues, with state and local funding and other initiatives, Gaston County is growing within its borders. The FUSE project and TechWorks, a technology incubator, are two factors.

Gaston College's Center for Advanced Manufacturing in Dallas and the college's Apprenticeship 321 program train a workforce needed to compete in an ever-developing job climate. And Bessemer City's South Ridge Business Park offers its proverbial welcome mat to lure foreign businesses — most recently Dholandia of Belgium — looking for a strategic location with infrastructure capable of moving products efficiently.

In a sure and steady manner, the makeup of this county of 217,000 is evolving. This section explores these factors, and what's making them succeed.



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# Training skilled workers of the future

A 21,000-square-foot brick and darkened-glass building in the Gastonia Technology Park on Highway 321 near Gaston College's main campus holds classrooms, training rooms and a large, open flex lab that can duplicate facilities of advanced manufacturing companies. Students learn technical skills that segue into profitable employment or gain job-specific knowledge while already employed. Manufacturing and energy industries preparing to locate in Gaston County utilize office space here until their new site is complete.

The Center for Advanced Manufacturing (CAM) opened in 2017 as a nucleus for learning, practicing and applying training in mechatronics, industrial-systems technology, instrumentation, alternative energy and other technical trades prevalent in Gaston's landscape. In the corresponding Apprenticeship 321 program,

employed students follow an occupational pathway tuition-free, while pursuing journey-worker certification, a diploma or an associate degree.

"The goal is to demonstrate increasing responsiveness to the work needs of our community," says Dennis McElhoe, vice president of Economic and Workforce Development at Gaston College. "The CAM is the basis for the apprenticeship program. We have a coordinator and a success coach working in that area, and our apprentices and degree-seeking students who are part of the regular college programs are enrolled at CAM."

Fifteen area companies have partnered with Apprenticeship 321, McElhoe says. "We're getting an increasing number of responses from within our region, and I think it's going to be more and more as we go along. We're still doing tours. It's been less than a year." The hooks for Apprentice

ship 321 are timing and salary. McElhoe tells a story of two graduates who, through employee-sponsored training, were able to graduate with no college debt and purchase a house. The oldest was 21. "I don't know a lot of people who come right out of college and can buy a house. One was in mechatronics, and one was an industrial maintenance technician."

This spring, the college is launching a Center for Workforce Excellence. "Through that program, we're offering quite a number of topics that are designed in response to employer needs, particularly those employers who are not in a position to participate in the apprenticeship program," McElhoe says.

One is a Building Maintenance Certification program in partnership with the Greater Charlotte Apartment Association, Community Foundation of Gaston County and a local apartment complex, designed to certify students in apartment and commercial-building maintenance. Areas of study will be carpentry, HVAC, electrical, plumbing and OSHA safety.

Other Workforce Excellence offerings will cover quality engineering, certified quality technician, basic electrical, PLC programming, maintenance safety and hazard awareness.

Steve Nye, marketing director of the Gaston County Economic Development Commission, says CAM, Apprenticeship 321 and Gaston College are imperative to recruiting business and training the workforce.

"We have had at least 10 projects to go through since September. It really tells the story of how committed this college is to providing the level of training, not only for the current workforce, but more importantly trying to grow the future skill base not only in Gaston County but in their service territory," Nye says.

"It's impressive to clients that come in here. It really does prepare individuals to work in the 21st century."

— Kathy Blake is a freelance writer based in eastern North Carolina.



PROVIDED BY GASTON COLLEGE

*The Apprentice 321 program is part of Gaston College's Center for Advanced Manufacturing, which trains students for highly skilled technical jobs.*

# Location. Accessibility. Proximity.



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Gaston County EDC  
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# TechWorks has high ambitions

The concept originated in 2014: Create a technology incubator in Gaston County to foster growth through acquired knowledge and applied productivity in an increasingly digital economy.

Through funding and local leadership, that concept is on the verge of being realized. An investment of \$2.1 million, including a \$1 million state grant last December, \$975,000 from Gaston County, \$97,500

from the city of Belmont and donor contributions, is producing TechWorks, scheduled to open this fall in two floors of renovated space in downtown Belmont. Already active with coding classes in conjunction with Gaston College, TechWorks aims to feed off its urban-rural roots, proximity to a major metropolitan area and expanded Wi-Fi through the Open Broadband program to elevate Gaston's presence for potential business and entrepreneurship.

"It's another arrow in our quiver. It can expand our audience," says Mark Cramer, executive director of the Greater Gaston Development Corp. "We can put a stake in the ground and say we're in that game. We're trying to expand the range of people and organizations that will take a good, hard look at Gaston County. It's not like we don't have a long history of being business-oriented, but being a tech center is not what we've been known for. The GGDC worked with 100-plus community leaders in 2014 to develop a strategic plan for the county focused on growing jobs and increasing the tax base. Those are our two guiding lights."

The Belmont location on Ervin Street, adjacent to newly opened Rivermen Brewing Co., will be a 14,000-square-foot technology innovation center with gigabit internet speed, coding classes and training, a digitally connected learning center with offices and shared workspace. It also offers conference and training rooms and a large event area. Its first coding class, at Gaston College's Kimbrell Campus last August, drew 11 students for Basic Web Development. Classes in web development and Android mobile app creation followed. Some students attend on scholarships offered through TechWorks.

Terry Cox, a leader in the entrepreneurial ecosystem of the Charlotte region for 14 years, is TechWorks' executive director. "I want people to turn their heads and go, 'Wow, what just happened in Gaston County?' Gaston County has that entrepreneurial DNA in its culture, and I want us to be a huge economic driver for the entire region," she says. "I don't think that's far-fetched. I think it's very doable."

In addition to piloting the mission to attract business, Cox, who also is president and CEO of Charlotte firm Business Innovation & Growth, says TechWorks will bolster existing companies with what she calls digital first aid. "We came up with that to help companies that have



PROVIDED BY TECHWORKS OF GASTON COUNTY

*TechWorks of Gaston County kicked off its launch event in March 2017, top, and plans to turn the 14,000-square-foot building into a technology innovation center for entrepreneurs in the digital age.*

not moved their business digitally. They have very traditional processes instead of moving their company to a more digital platform,” she says. “It’s to help with a road map, a digital transformation road map. Without that, companies are not going to be able to compete.”

Training courses through TechWorks not only will help job-seekers but eventually could branch into workforce development. “I would love to customize courses for corporations ... whether it’s mobile development or website development,” Cox says.

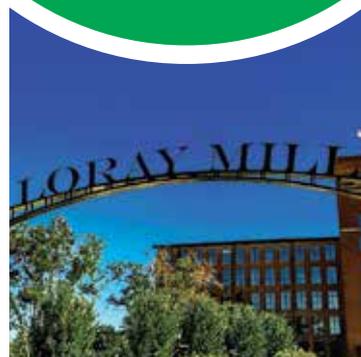
TechWorks will host an eight-week Network 101 course this summer to cover network engineering and anticipates several courses for the Ervin Street office later this year.

“To be a true tech hub, we are trying to roll out gigabit high-speed wireless to the entire county, which will hit all the townships, so everybody can access it and do their jobs,” Cox says. “Open Broadband is our partner, and we’re going to roll out Gaston County as fast as we can. Without the infrastructure, you can’t do the tasks you really want to do.”

Cramer says planting the company in Belmont is ideal because of the city’s accessibility to Mecklenburg County and Charlotte Douglas International Airport, and because it maintains a small-town atmosphere. “We can attract a lot of people from Charlotte who don’t want to live there and can look for amenities that Belmont provides as far as environment. Gaston is a potential pilot for the state as a technology hub in a ring county, the counties around a major city that bridges the gap between urban and rural. People can draw on the hub cities and the resources there, but they prefer the fringe counties,” he says.

“Organizations will take a good, hard look at Gaston County. They’ll want to expand here, and they’ll want to grow here.”

— *Kathy Blake is a freelance writer based in eastern North Carolina.*



## BUILDING THE FUTURE IN GASTON— JUST OUTSIDE CHARLOTTE.

Gaston Outside celebrates the people, places, natural beauty and businesses—from start-ups to international firms—that make Gaston County such an amazing area. Our thriving local economy and exciting development opportunities are a few reasons why so many businesses call our county home.

Learn how Gaston County’s bold ventures and exciting opportunities are shaping the future of business.



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# Belgian firm to locate in Gaston

More than a dozen foreign-based firms are located in Gaston County, most of them at the South Ridge Business Park, a 425-acre site in Bessemer City, 7 miles northwest of Gastonia. The latest addition is Belgium-based Dhollandia, which announced plans in December to invest \$30 million in its first U.S. location.

Dhollandia manufactures passenger wheelchair lifts for buses and vans and a range of hydraulic and other lifts for trucks and large vehicles. The company broke ground in early April on its 55-acre parcel and expects to open by second-quarter 2019, says Steve Nye, marketing director at the Gaston County Economic Development Commission.

"Out in that park, you have an Israeli company, and one from the Netherlands. There are several Ger-

man companies in the area, and from the Basque region of Spain, and Italy," Nye says. "They were seeking location. Through our relationship with the Charlotte Regional Partnership and the EDPNC, this is part of the outreach the state has when foreign companies come in looking for site selection.

"One reason [Dhollandia] chose that business park is that all the utilities were in place, along with the roads and sewer. We're good at infrastructure, and we were instrumental in providing information on the Charlotte region."

Rail access and proximity to Charlotte Douglas International Airport were selling points, along with access to a ready workforce through Gaston College's Center for Advanced Manufacturing and Apprenticeship 321 program, which does customized training.

Dennis McElhoe, vice president of Economic and Workforce Development at Gaston College, has had preliminary discussions with Dhollandia. The company intends to hire about 150 engineers, managers and production workers, with an average annual wage of \$46,100, about 20% higher than the Gaston County overall average of \$38,780.

"We've had conversations with them and we were involved with recruiting the company," McElhoe says. "During our discussions, they seemed to be fairly interested in the apprenticeship program. I have every reason to believe they will become involved when the facility is up and running."

— *Kathy Blake is a freelance writer based in eastern North Carolina.*



## The Gaston College Center for Advanced Manufacturing (CAM)

870 Gastonia Technology Parkway  
Dallas, North Carolina

This new state-of-the-art technical training center will prepare students for jobs in fields ranging from mechatronics to electrical systems technology and robotics. CAM also includes temporary office and meeting space for new industries seeking to locate in the region.

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**Call 704.922.6513 to schedule a tour  
and discover how CAM can work for your business.**

# FUSE to transform Franklin area

Franklin Boulevard is a 4½-mile crowded artery of shopping plazas, restaurants, gas stations and abundant spotlights that pumps life through Gastonia. At its western end, where commercialism gives way to government buildings and blue-collar shops, a 16-acre block bordered by Franklin, South Hill Street, South Trenton Street and West Main Avenue is being recalculated as a retail, residential and entertainment magnet.

A Sears building, empty for decades, has been demolished and Trenton Mill — a vacant, historic textile mill on West Main built in 1897 — awaits repurposing. The Budget Inn at West Franklin and South Hill will meet the bulldozer. From this square parcel, the Franklin Urban Sports and Entertainment (FUSE) complex will rise.

FUSE's centerpiece will be a 4,000-seat multiuse stadium whose primary function will be baseball. The Gastonia Grizzlies of the summer collegiate Coastal Plain League currently play at nearby Sims Legion Park. The stadium would be capable of converting for other sports and outdoor concerts. In April 2017, the city of Gastonia partnered with the UNC School of Government's Development Finance Initiative for development of the first phase of the FUSE district at Trenton Mill, which the city acquired for \$495,000. Plans call for 75 studio, one-bedroom and two-bedroom apartments and to use the mill's 1,800-square-foot outbuilding for retail and restaurants. The estimated development cost for the Trenton Mill project is \$14.2 million.

The city is expected to break ground on the stadium in December, with opening day set for 2020.

"About nine months ago, you would see the effects of years of disinvestment in the area. Right now, it's all about creating a destination and really changing an area into being a lively and revitalized place that has excitement," says Kristy Crisp, Gastonia's economic-development director. "The long-term goal is to provide a connector between downtown and the Loray [Mill] Village



PROVIDED BY THE GREATER GASTON DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION

*The Franklin Urban Sports and Entertainment (FUSE) complex will be built on 16 acres.*

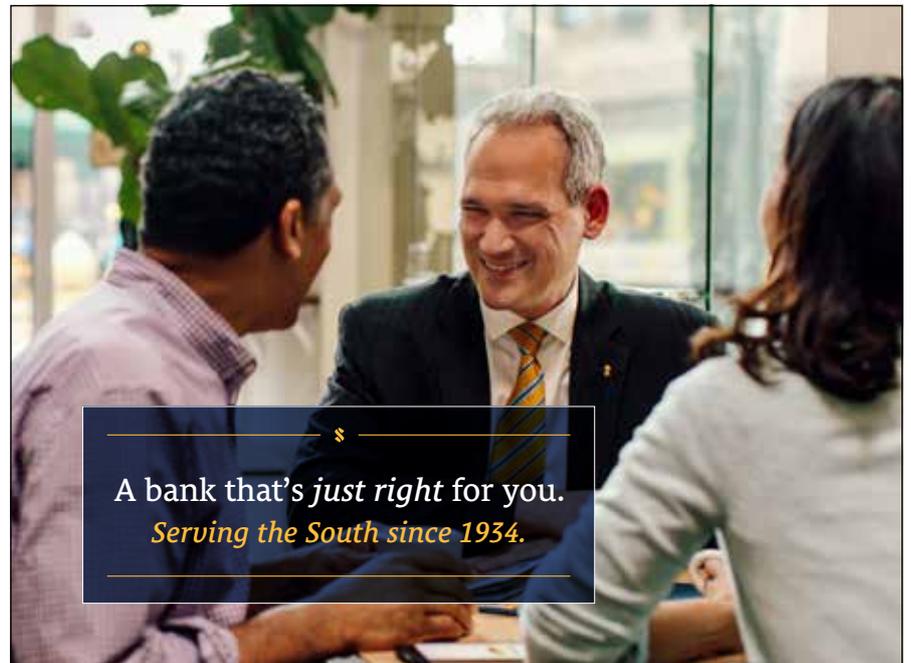
[historic] area. It will change the whole course of Franklin Boulevard."

The city spent approximately \$4 million for FUSE land for the stadium complex and estimates stadium construction at \$13.5 million. Officials are working with Rodgers Builders of Charlotte for construction and

hired Pendulum Studio of Kansas City, Mo., as stadium architect for \$1.26 million.

"We're hoping to play ball in 2020. It's an aggressive goal, but it's not out of our realm of possibilities," Crisp says.

— *Kathy Blake is a freelance writer based in eastern North Carolina.*



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