



*Downtown Gastonia is about to get a whole new look, complete with a baseball stadium, apartments and restaurants. The goal is to make the area more walkable and cater to a fast-growing population. This is a rendering provided by the city of Gastonia.*

## COMMUNITY CLOSE-UP: GASTON COUNTY

# FUSE NEWS

Gastonia's lofty sports, entertainment and mixed-use residential development project is underway, with plans to open a baseball stadium in spring 2021.

Construction on Gastonia's 16-acre Franklin Urban Sports and Entertainment District started in December, a major milestone for the revitalization project also known as FUSE.

On paper, the 5,000-seat, \$26.2 million stadium and outparcel restaurants, business sites and mixed-use residential development will fill the land gap between downtown Gastonia and the historic 1902 Loray Mill, now upfitted into loft apartments. But for Gastonia Mayor Walker Reid III, FUSE is also the start button on a machine that is revitalizing North Carolina's 13th-largest city.

Reid says FUSE already has attracted \$75 million in private investment. The

refurbishing of Trenton Mill, which will sit just beyond the outfield wall, began in January, turning the 1897 mill into 81,862 square feet of residential space, 84 apartments — at a development cost of \$14.2 million.

On the stadium's right-field side, a North Carolina craft-beer company will begin to repurpose a 5,000-square-foot warehouse formerly owned by Coca-Cola into a brewery in February.

FUSE's expectations have increased



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*The FUSE District will fill the land gap between downtown Gastonia and Loray Mill and will include a 5,000-seat stadium that will house concerts, ballgames and other large-scale events.*

interest in other areas of downtown. There are talks of adding a distillery, a hotel with views of the stadium, and a restaurant called The Fed will open later this year in the former Citizens National Bank building on West Main Avenue.

FUSE's development is in part due to the fast-growing Gaston County, which can be traced across the Catawba River to Mecklenburg County: Commuter numbers going into Charlotte continue to rise as people choose to live in smaller surrounding cities like Gastonia.

"Gastonia has very nice historic buildings, and it's put us in the position at the right time to welcome the overflow from Charlotte," says Kristy Ratchford Crisp, economic development director for Gastonia. "The success of Loray Mill has been a huge boost, and we see people who want to live here. People are looking at it as more affordable."

The city's population increased by 6,000 from 2010 to 2018, and adding more entertainment and retail options necessitates adding transportation options. Crowds soon will be able to get to venues such as FUSE more easily thanks to ongoing transportation projects.

Citing its link as a "vital corridor for commuters to the Charlotte metropolitan area," the N.C. Department of Transportation will widen Interstate 85 for a 10-mile segment from U.S. 321 in Gastonia to N.C. 273 in Mount Holly



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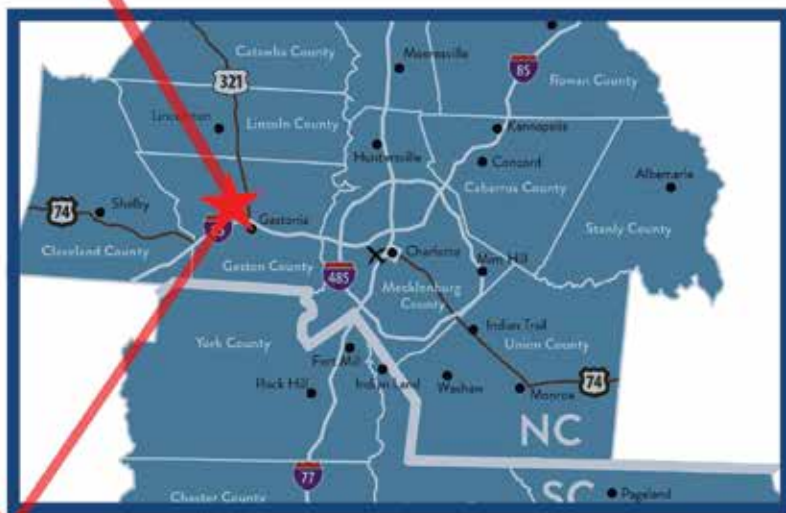
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## COMMUNITY CLOSE-UP: GASTON COUNTY



*The historic 1902 Loray Mill was upfitted into loft apartments in 2014, with selling points including a dog park, swimming pool and full gym.*

from six lanes to eight. The project will begin in 2024 at a cost of \$262.8 million. Additionally, the Charlotte Area Transit System approved plans last year to extend light rail service across the Catawba River to Gaston County by 2030, and Reid says improvements could eventually be made to traffic routes on Franklin Boulevard to accommodate nearby development.

Reid is hopeful these transportation changes, FUSE and other new ventures in Gastonia will help the downtown area grow.

"We've always had a great lunch crowd, but we haven't prospered to my expectations. People leave after 5 o'clock," he says. "But we have developers now who will build an apartment complex downtown and because we will have people living there, it will draw businesses. It's going to be a game changer. We want to make downtown walkable: to a concert, to a ballgame, to people living at Loray Mill. These will all complement each other."

The FUSE stadium is on pace to open for baseball in spring 2021. Krisp says stadium officials are working with the Atlantic League of Professional Baseball to bring a pro team to the city. This would add a second Atlantic League team to North Carolina: The High Point Rockers moved to N.C. in 2017 from Bridgeport, Conn. "It will be fun and [add] another layer in the sports offerings we have here in North Carolina," Krisp says.

Reid says taking FUSE and its surrounding growth slowly from concept stage to actual construction has benefited the city and has allowed careful planning for housing and entertainment options.

"We're also making enhancements at our municipal airport, so that's going to bring in more economic development," he says. "I think in two years, we'll look at each other and say, 'Are we still in Gastonia?' And in five years, it will be, 'Wow, I can't believe this.' There's a lot of pieces of the puzzle being moved around. I'm excited to be here and promote this city." ■



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## Gastonia's FUSE DISTRICT Investing in Our Economic Future

The Franklin Urban Sports + Entertainment District is Gastonia's economic development project that is attracting new commercial development to the heart of our City. A \$35 million public/private investment that will feature retail, offices, apartments, restaurants, and entertainment options. The crown jewel of this project is our 5,000-seat stadium opening in spring 2021. It will host Atlantic League games as well as other sports and cultural events. The FUSE DISTRICT is open for business and ready to create jobs, increase the tax base, and fuel economic growth. Join us!



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# PHYSICIANS, PROFESSORS AND PARTNERSHIPS

CaroMont's Belmont medical center — set to open in the next few years — is already creating opportunity for the area.

When CaroMont Regional Medical Center-Belmont opens on land leased from Belmont Abbey College, it will be another check mark on the hospital's \$325 million list of facilities improvements and — through a partnership with the school — will further accommodate growth in eastern Gaston County.

The hospital, located off Exit 26 on Interstate 85, is expected to open by 2023 and will create an estimated 300 jobs by year three of operation, says

CaroMont President and CEO Chris Peek. Belmont, on the eastern edge of Gaston County, borders the Catawba River and is bisected by I-85, the main connector to Mecklenburg County and Charlotte Douglas International Airport.

"For the first time since the early 1970s, the North Carolina State Medical Facilities Plan identified the need for additional hospital beds in Gaston County. We were already seeing patient volumes increase," says Peek, who adds the CaroMont system sees nearly 1 million patient interactions annually. "And we're pleased the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services Division of Health Service Regulation and the North Carolina State Health Coordinating Council recognized the need as well."

The full offering of services is still

being planned, Peek says, but the Belmont hospital will have an emergency department, a 66-bed inpatient unit for admission or observation, a labor and delivery unit, operating rooms and surgical capabilities as well as diagnostic services with a laboratory and imaging. "Our plans also include a medical-office building for outpatient services and physician offices," he says.

In addition to leasing the land from Belmont Abbey, the college's new health-sciences program, designed to work closely with the coming hospital, will begin accepting students this fall. The impact will benefit the college, city and region, says interim Provost Linda Delene.

"This is no accident. This is an intentional development of strength and will



*CaroMont Regional Medical Center-Belmont, expected to open in 2023, will include a 66-bed inpatient unit for admission or observation, a labor and delivery unit, and operating rooms.*



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## COMMUNITY CLOSE-UP: GASTON COUNTY

change the character of this county and this area because of the collaborative nature of what we're doing," Delene says. "This is so different than everyone trying to build their own birdhouse and saying, 'My birdhouse is better than yours.' This is everyone trying to raise the opportunities for the county [in] employment and health care. We have a group of people sitting down with each other and talking about how they can do things together, and it's been awesome."

The ultimate goal is to increase access to health care across the state, and part of this is training the next generation of health care employees.

The private, Catholic liberal arts college was founded in 1876 by Benedictine monks and has an enrollment of 1,556. Its 47 areas of academic study include health care and biology pre-professional pathways in pre-med, pre-vet and pre-nursing.

"The hospital will provide what we call instructional and educational space either in the tower or in a medical-specialties building," Delene says. "The college is working with what I call a

vast group of county partners to set up three academic programs — one in nursing, one in social work and one in health informatics."

The nursing segment will offer a four-year bachelor's degree and a program for current registered nurses looking to obtain their degree. All three programs must be approved by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges; a request will be filed in March. Formal approval is expected by December, Delene says.

Belmont Abbey incurred a one-year probation in December 2017 from SACS due to revenue from adult students age 23 and older declining faster than revenue gains from traditional programs. Delene was named interim provost in 2018, and her appointment will end in June. She has more than 50 years of experience in higher education, including as provost and vice president of academic affairs at Western Michigan University and vice president of planning at Kalamazoo College.

She calls the Belmont Abbey and CaroMont pairing "geometrically enabling for economic growth." The hope

is for the partnership to encourage graduates to stay in the area.

"I used to do a few economic development studies and usually for every \$1 that's spent, the net effect in the community is two or three additional dollars," she says. "If you take the cost of the hospital going in there, that's \$750 million."

CaroMont is also constructing a four-floor patient tower at its main Regional Medical Center campus in Gastonia with 50 additional patient rooms. The system's 15th primary-care office opens in Cramerton in February.

"The advancing age of our population has already resulted in an increased need for critical-care capacity in the hospital, and current projections suggest the demand will continue to grow," Peek says. "Additionally, we continue to look for opportunities to develop and expand our network of physician practices. The majority of patient-care interactions occur in primary- and specialty-care offices, so ensuring we have a robust network of office locations is important for access and convenience." ■

## COMING SOON TO BELMONT

A project nearly seven years in the making will begin this month in Belmont, just a hop, skip and jump away from Charlotte Douglas International Airport.

*Chronicle Mill, a former yarn-manufacturing plant, has*



*After nearly seven years, renovations on Chronicle Mill will begin this month.*

*been vacant for years, but that will soon change. Husband and wife team John and Jennifer Church purchased the mill in 2013 and have been working for years behind the scenes to reinvent the building to be a commercial and living space. Construction is expected to begin in February, Jennifer Church says.*

*It's been a long road because Church and her husband were committed to finding a developer who would work with them to save the mill, rather than tearing down to build something new. She anticipates the renovation will cost \$35 million, much more than if the couple had decided to start from scratch. But saving the building and incorporating the existing facade into their plans was important to the pair.*

*The completed development project will have 12,000 square feet of commercial space in addition to more than 240 studio, one- and two-bedroom apartments. Of the apartments, 90 will exist in the current mill building, while another building nearby will support the rest. Church anticipates the first apartments will be available in June 2021.*



# Historic Downtown **BELMONT**



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## COMMUNITY CLOSE-UP: GASTON COUNTY

# MALL MAKEOVER

As many regional shopping centers struggle, a Charlotte developer has high hopes for transforming Gastonia's Eastridge Mall into the area's hot spot.



During a time when malls across the country are struggling, US Developments is transforming the area surrounding Gastonia's Eastridge Mall in an attempt to draw more people in.

Gastonia Mayor Walker Reid III remembers working in a ghost town.

During his 23 years with the Mecklenburg County Fire Marshal's Office, he saw uptown Charlotte transition from empty storefronts to a

residential, business and entertainment hub. "I was working in the 700 block of North Tryon [Street], and I could get in my car at 5 o'clock, hit every light, and get to Morehead Street in no time," he says of the job he held until 2009. "When [department stores] Belk and Ivey's left, it was empty."

At this time, a mall in the suburbs was the place for shopping and entertainment. In Reid's hometown of Gastonia, Eastridge Mall drew in shoppers with a movie theater, Morrison's Cafeteria and stores. "I think it's [been]

the trend where malls suck the life out of downtowns, and now it's that downtowns suck the life out of the malls," he says.

Eastridge Mall opened on former dairy farm land in 1976, anchored by Belk, J.C. Penney and Ivey's department stores. Dillard's, which acquired Ivey's, now operates a clearance store at the mall, while the J.C. Penney store closed in 2017. Sears also operated a large store at the mall from 1998 through 2014. Since 2013, the mall has been owned by Brooklyn, N.Y.-based CityView Commercial.



While the mall has seen stores leave over the last several years, officials are banking on a proposed \$150 million overhaul with family-oriented activities, new stores, restaurants and apartments, hoping it will breathe new life into the shopping center. Construction is expected to begin in the second or third quarter of 2020 and will include an 800-space parking deck.

US Developments, a Charlotte brokerage-management development firm, has the task of taking Eastridge's massive parking-lot area and remodeling it into a crowd magnet. Company CEO and President Stephen Rosenburgh calls it a "reimagining."

Part of Rosenburgh's business identity is providing solutions to "distressed real estate assets." He says Eastridge fits that description.

"It is distressed. And because it's distressed, the big thing is to bring in these additional users who will be part of the mixed-use development," he says. "We're talking to people, but we are still working on our master plan. You have to bring all the pieces together and make sure they fit; like, you may have entertainment like a bowling alley, but you don't want it next door to a movie theater. The pieces have to fit together. It's a little like an orchestra. Everyone has to play together, but they have to play their section."

While some sections are still being developed, Gaston Aquatics is poised to build a \$6 million, 35,000-square-foot aquatics center on the property with an Olympic-size pool, a competition site for the county's seven public high school swim teams and private teams, aquatic therapy, a heated pool for lessons, and an elevated seating area.

Reid anticipates the development — along with the \$75 million Franklin Urban Sports and Entertainment District just 2.6 miles from Eastridge Mall — will increase traffic to the city. Changes will be made to Franklin Road to assist with additional traffic. The Charlotte Area Transit System is also considering establishing a Silver Line light rail sys-

## GASTON COLLEGE WELCOMES APPRENTICESHIP 321 CLASS

**Students receive job-specific training and a cost-free education from Gaston College while earning a salary from local employers.**

*In its fourth year, the Gaston College Apprenticeship 321 program is still going strong, welcoming its latest class in September last year. The program is designed to offer participants job-specific training through Gaston College while also earning a salary from local employers.*

*The program welcomed 16 new students into the current program, bringing the total number of students participating up to 29. These students choose among the three apprenticeship levels:*

*Pre-Apprenticeship, which caters to high school juniors and seniors, Advanced Manufacturing and Paramedic Medicine.*

*Since September 2015, seven individuals have graduated from the program and are now working in the advanced-manufacturing industry thanks to skills they learned. Currently, 15 local companies participate in the program to allow students the ability to gain hands-on experience in their industry.*

*Certified nursing assistant program students can also take advantage of the Apprenticeship 321 program, working*

*with CaroMont staff to gain on-the-job experience while also learning through classroom, lab and clinical experience. Once completed, students can apply for listing as a Nurse Aide II by the North Carolina Board of Nursing. In October, the program's second graduation ceremony was held for 15 nursing students.*

*The goal is to increase the local employment force while giving students real-job experience before they're in the industry.*

*"Gaston County Emergency Medical Services and Lincoln County EMS employ emergency medical technicians who can earn a paycheck and get hands-on experience while working on paramedic education for certification. The Gaston College students in the Paramedic Apprenticeship program are the beginning of a new partnership to increase the EMS workforce in our service area of Gaston and Lincoln counties," said Kent Spitler, director of the Gaston College Department for EMS Education, in a press release.*



*Gaston College's Apprenticeship 321 Advanced Manufacturing Program just welcomed six new students who will work with local businesses to gain on-the-job training through the college.*

## COMMUNITY CLOSE-UP: GASTON COUNTY



Alongside the \$75 million Franklin Urban Sports and Entertainment District just 2.6 miles away, city officials anticipate traffic will increase to the Gastonia mall just 35 minutes from Charlotte.

tem from Charlotte to Belmont by 2030 and possibly expanding to Gastonia eventually.

Putting new structures on the concrete now being used for parking will ultimately draw people into the mall, Rosenburgh says. "You want to provide the goods and services that Gaston County needs."

Realistically, he says, the whole upfit could take three to five years.

Eastridge's end result will be a much different atmosphere from the malls — and downtowns — of Reid's childhood.

"This, too, will have things that draw people for entertainment," he says. "Times change, and it can never be what it was when I was a kid growing up, but I can see it being a vibrant place for people to socialize, to be entertained and to have a good quality of life. We're open for business." ■

— Kathy Blake is a freelance writer from eastern N.C.



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