



Go, Gaston! And get movin'!

Making the county a walkable, bikeable community

By Michael Applegate, Director, Gaston County Travel and Tourism

Many American communities are striving to be more walkable and bikeable and thus more livable.

That's a worthy goal. And Gaston County is no exception. But first, a bit of background:

Along with other County departments, Gaston County Travel and Tourism has been working to create goals, strategies and actions that support top county priorities as adopted by the Gaston County Board of Commissioners. Overall, there are five priorities: job creation and economic development; education; healthy communities; public safety; and quality of life. In the areas of healthy communities and quality of life specifically, travel and tourism has a lot to contribute.

For instance, because of its importance to the visitors we strive to bring here and the residents who already live here, it's in our interest to ensure great access to cultural, historical, recreational, tourism and leisure opportunities throughout the great destination that is Gaston County. One way to do that is to provide safe, connected, accessible and well-maintained greenways, parks, bike paths, trails and recreational facilities that capitalize on our natural resources. Through our outdoors destination branding and messaging, we promote and support said natural resources as destination draws. These experiences



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serve to motivate people to visit our locations.

And the County's new bike-sharing program re-enforces our sales and marketing efforts and brand positioning. Another priority the bike program aligns with is community health, well-being, education and lifelong learning. To promote community health, we set a goal to develop, enhance and invest in outdoor recreational areas and a walkable, bikeable community. To accomplish that, we are working in partnership with Gaston County Parks and Recreation, county municipalities and the Carolina Thread Trail to grow, improve and program existing facilities and preserved space. Doing so creates another amenity to offer visitors and residents and again supports our destination messaging that Gaston County offers an outdoors, active, natural, healthful and desirable place to live and to visit.

Reliable infrastructure and effective mobility are also important considerations, as they apply directly to the experience a visitor has in navigating between various points of interest within our destination. Our goal here is to provide a safe, well-maintained transportation system, and that can take many forms and considerations, from roads to sidewalks to bike lanes to signage and way-finding.

Learning about Zagster

We learned about Zagster, the company that provides the bike share system, through its success with other communities our size. For the past 10 years, Zagster has worked with many cities, counties, corporations and universities to supply an easy, convenient turnkey service to manage and operate the program and to support it with the necessary customer service, insurance, liability and regular maintenance needed to keep it running effectively. Riders get access to the service through a telephone application similar to *Uber*; the popular private taxi service. Just download the app, set up an account, upload your payment information, unlock a bike and go.

The bike share program currently has four locations: the Gaston County Visitors Center at 620 N. Main St. in Belmont; Poston Park at 101 Lowell-Spencer Mountain Road in Gastonia; the Highland Rail Trail on East Long Avenue



in Gastonia; and Dallas Park at 1303 Dallas-Cherryville Highway in Dallas.


We launched the program on May 27. As of late July, we've already signed up 156 active members who have taken a total of 247 trips. So far, Poston Park has been the busiest access spot, followed by Highland Rail Trail, Dallas Park and the Gaston County Visitors Center.


Next steps

From these initial spots, we are planning to add more stations near additional points of interest.

In the meantime, the Carolina Thread Trail's existing plans call for Dallas Park connections to Gaston College, Gaston Technology Park, Rankin Lake and the Highland Rail Trail. Downtown Lowell has funded completing sidewalks from there to Poston Park. The park will also eventually connect to the Carolina Thread Trail. The visitors' center, by way of the Belmont Rail Trail, will connect to Belmont Abbey College and downtown Belmont some time before the year ends.


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Given some of these imminent improvements, we've been strategic with our choices for the first set of stations. To grow further, we see several possibilities for additional stations in Dallas, Gastonia, Belmont, Mount Holly, McAdenville, Lowell, Cramerton and Bessemer City to extend this system across the county and tie together more great outdoor recreation areas for residents and visitors to enjoy and explore. Several community sponsors have also taken an interest in helping us to extend our reach, and we look forward to finalizing those opportunities soon. In the meantime, we encourage you to "Go Gaston and get outside," using the County's bike share program! 




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