



# 2024 Parks & Recreation Master Plan Update

Gaston County, North Carolina

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



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Lake at George Poston Park

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Gaston County is located in the southern Piedmont region of North Carolina and is considered part of the Charlotte-Concord-Gastonia, NC Statistical Area. Gaston County has fifteen incorporated municipalities with the county seat located in Gastonia. The Gaston County Parks and Recreation Department “plans, develops, and maintains parks, and provides an array of organized activities to help meet the leisure needs of the citizens of the County.”

The mission of Gaston County Parks and Recreation is to “Acquire, develop, maintain and manage parks; efficiently manage public resources and provide opportunities for citizens to participate in wholesome leisure activities.”

At the present time, the County maintains and operates 20 parks. The parks system makes Gaston County a more attractive and desirable place for residents, businesses, and industry.

While this report makes note of existing municipal parks in Gaston County, it’s focus is on Gaston County managed and maintained parks.

Most of the publicly owned parks located in Gaston County are owned and operated by it’s municipalities. These facilities include parks located in Belmont, Bessemer City, Cherryville, Cramerton, Dallas, High Shoals, Gastonia, Lowell, Mount Holly, Ranlo, and Stanley. The majority of these parks fall into the Community Park (20-40 acres), Neighborhood Park (5-20 acres), and Mini Parks (1-2 acres) classification. These existing municipal parks provide a good platform for recreational activities for citizens living within the municipalities.



The purpose of this master plan is to evaluate the current system and develop recommendations along with a 10-year capital program to achieve a shared vision for meeting parks and recreation needs. This plan will help guide future parks and recreation improvements across the county from 2023 to 2032. Development of this master plan included public engagement activities; demographic analysis; and facility, program, and staffing assessments. This document serves as both a strategic plan and an action plan. It provides the Gaston County Parks and Recreation Department with guidelines and strategies for future planning efforts and capital improvement projects.



**Figure 1** shows the location of the county park facilities in Gaston County. In addition to the county parks, Gaston County Board of Education has partnered with the Parks and Recreation Department for joint use of eleven school park facilities. Finally, the private sector offers recreational activities throughout the county to meet the various needs of the community.



## 2 COMMUNITY PROFILE

An important step in understanding the park, recreational, trails and facility needs of Gaston County is to develop an understanding of the people that make up the county. Section Two includes an overview of the county, including an assessment of the county's history, features, population, and demographics. This overview focuses on changes that are occurring throughout the county. This section also identifies the importance of providing healthy options (programs and facilities) in an effort, to improve community health.

In addition to reviewing the county's projected growth, demographic changes and community health, the Needs Assessment included several public engagement opportunities to gather information on public demand/expectations for future parks. These initiatives included:

- County Wide Survey
- Staff and Stakeholder Meetings
- Public Workshops
- Input from Parks and Recreation Advisory Board

Through these public engagements, considerable insight was gained regarding the public's desire for parks and recreation programs, facilities, and trails. This section discusses the information gathered in preparation of this Parks and Recreation Master Plan update.

### 2.1 County Features and History

While ranking 74th of North Carolina's 100 counties by size, Gaston County is the state's seventh largest county based on population. The majority of the county's population (approximately 130,000) reside within one of the county's fifteen incorporated areas. The larger municipalities within the county include (in order of population):

- 1) Gastonia
- 2) Mount Holly
- 3) Belmont
- 4) Cherryville
- 5) Bessemer City
- 6) Cramerton
- 7) Dallas
- 8) Stanley

The county was originally settled by Scots Irish, Pennsylvania Dutch, and English. In the 1750s, tension between the early settlers and the Native Americans (Cherokee) resulted in a fort being constructed at the junction of the Catawba and South Fork Rivers. Tensions were eased in the early 1770s when the boundary dispute between North and South Carolina was resolved; resulting in the Catawba Tribe being settled on a reservation near Fort Mill.

Early farming in the area consisted of small farms primarily by white yeoman farmers of English ancestry. With North Carolina's colonial policy restricting the size of the land grants, most farms in the county tended to be approximately 400 acres.

Gaston County was founded in 1846. It was named for William Gaston, a member of the State Supreme Court.

Cotton led to an industrial boom in the county between 1845 and 1848. During that period, three cotton mills were established in the county. While there is some discussion with regards to which mill was built first, the cotton revolution was driven by Thomas R. Tate at Mountain Island, the Lineberger Family on the South Fork River, and the Stowesville Mill operated by Jasper Stowe and Associates in the South Point Community south of Belmont.

Natural resources are an important aspect of Gaston County's heritage. Resources range from Crowders Mountain in the southwest corner of the county to sites east of Stanley and at the mouth of the South Fork Catawba River. The county has twelve natural heritage sites of state or regional significance. These sites include:

- Six sites with Bigleaf Magnolia
- Two sites that provide habitat for the Bog Turtle
- Crowders Mountain State Park
- Pinnacle Road site
- Stagecoach Road site
- Farm site with old growth forest

The heritage sites contain a wide variety of unique plant, animal, and geological features including, Bigleaf Magnolia, Dwarf Junipers, granitic outcroppings, Fame Flower, Small Sedum, Pineweed, old farm growth (Beech, Yellow Poplar, Oaks, and Maples), Schweintz's Sunflower, and Magnolia Vine.

## 2.2 Landform

Gaston County is part of the Piedmont Plateau between the Foothills of the Appalachians and the Sandhills of the coastal plain. The county's gently rolling terrain is punctuated with a series of geological features that are an important part of the county's history and identity. These features include Crowders Mountain, King's Pinnacle, Pasour Mountain, Jackson Knob, and Spencer Mountain.

## 2.3 Population

The total population in Gaston County based on 2020 Census data is approximately 233,231. **Figure 2** shows how population density has changed over time. The figure shows that population primarily grew out of the Gastonia metro area and east towards Belmont and north up to Mt. Holly.

Parks planning not only accounts for needs of the current population, but also those of the future population. The county's population in 2010 was just over 206,000, which represents an 8.6% increase in population since the 2000 census (190,365). From 2010 until 2015, the county's population grew by



3.6%, to an estimated 213,416. In comparison, based on the population of 233,231 in 2020, Gaston County grew approximately 9.2% from 2015, which shows an increase in growth rate than in previous years. While a more rapid growth than many North Carolina rural counties, this growth rate has been comparable to several North Carolina counties with similar proximity to the Charlotte metro area.

Between 2000 and 2010, the fastest growth segment of the population was in people 15-34. This population segment reflected 31.4% of the population growth. Those over 55 accounted for 25.8% of the population growth during that same period.

Using U.S. Census data and other relevant resources, the County's 2035 Comprehensive Land Use Plan projected an annual growth rate of 0.8% for Gaston County. Based on this growth rate, the plan projected the county's population to be 232,454 by 2025 and 251,747 by 2035. However, this growth rate was higher than expected, with a 2020 population (233,231) already exceeding the 2025 population estimate. As a ten-year plan, the Comprehensive Parks and Recreation Plan Update is focused on meeting the needs of the County's service population in 2033. The 2030 projected population for Gaston County if you continue the current rate of growth will be 252,575. For planning purposes, this projected population will be rounded to 253,000. Likewise, for the purpose of this planning report, 233,000 will be used as the county's current (2020) population.

**FIGURE 2: HISTORIC CHANGE IN POPULATION DENSITY OVER TIME**

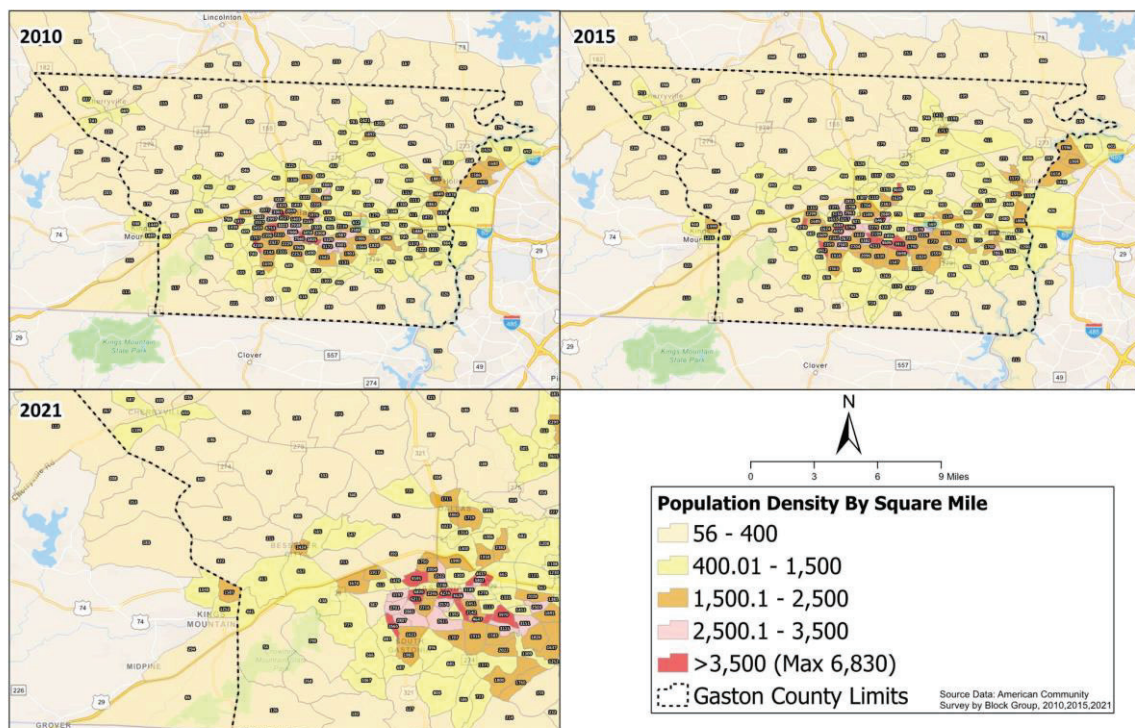
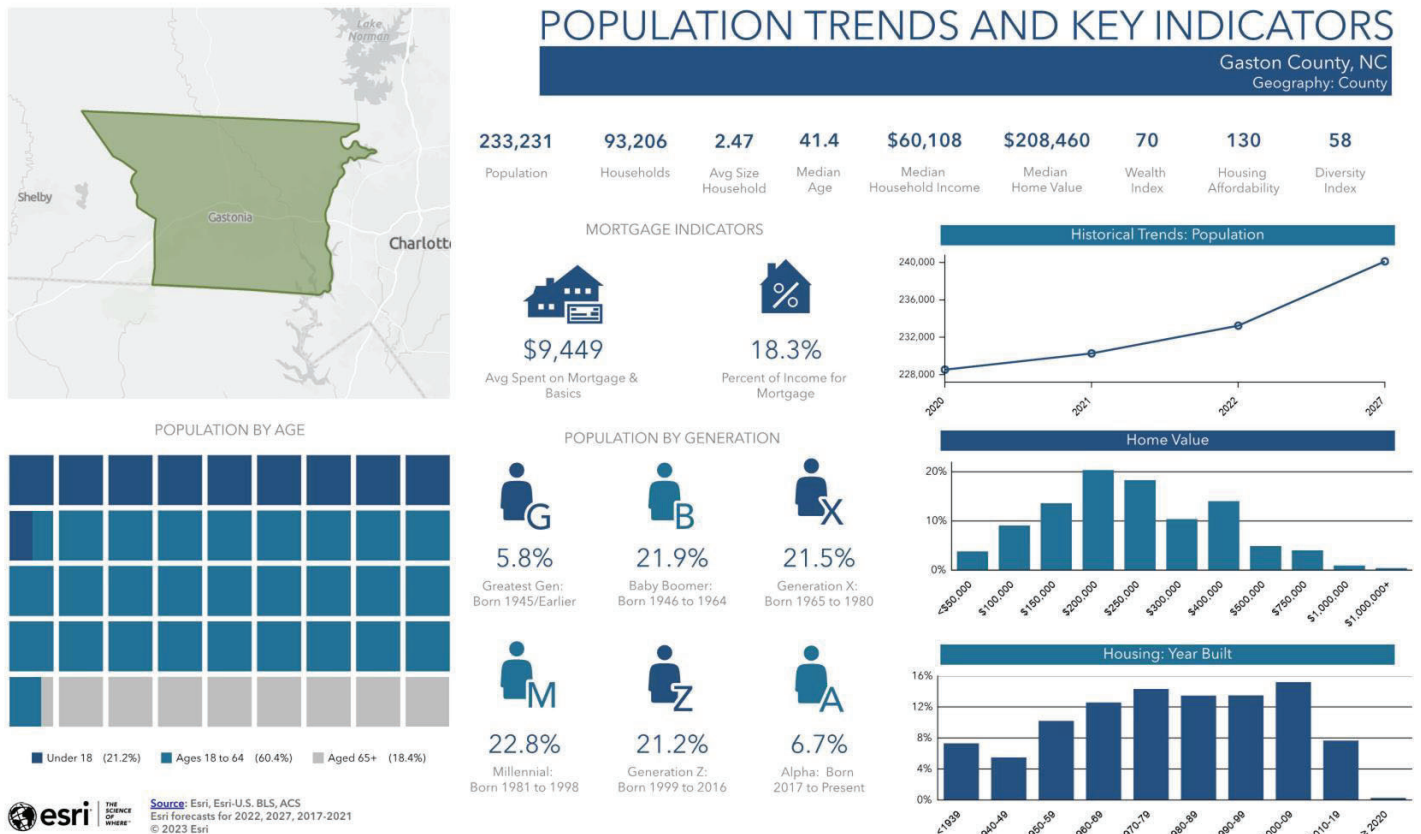


FIGURE 3: GASTON COUNTY PROJECTED POPULATION TRENDS



## 2.4 Demographics

Based on U.S. Census Bureau information (2020), Gaston County is predominantly white (75.4%). This percentage of white population is significantly higher than the State's white population percentage (69.9%). Black/African Americans are the next largest racial group with 19.5% of the population. Significantly less than the State's percentage of Black/African Americans (22.2%). The Hispanic/Latino population represents just over 8.9% of the county's total population, while the State's Hispanic/Latino population is over 10.5%.

The median age in Gaston County is 41.4, which is older than the previous median age of 39.4 in 2015; it is also higher than the current state's (38.9) and the national (38.1) median age. As with most counties in North Carolina, the female population (51.5%) is greater than the county's male population (48.5%).

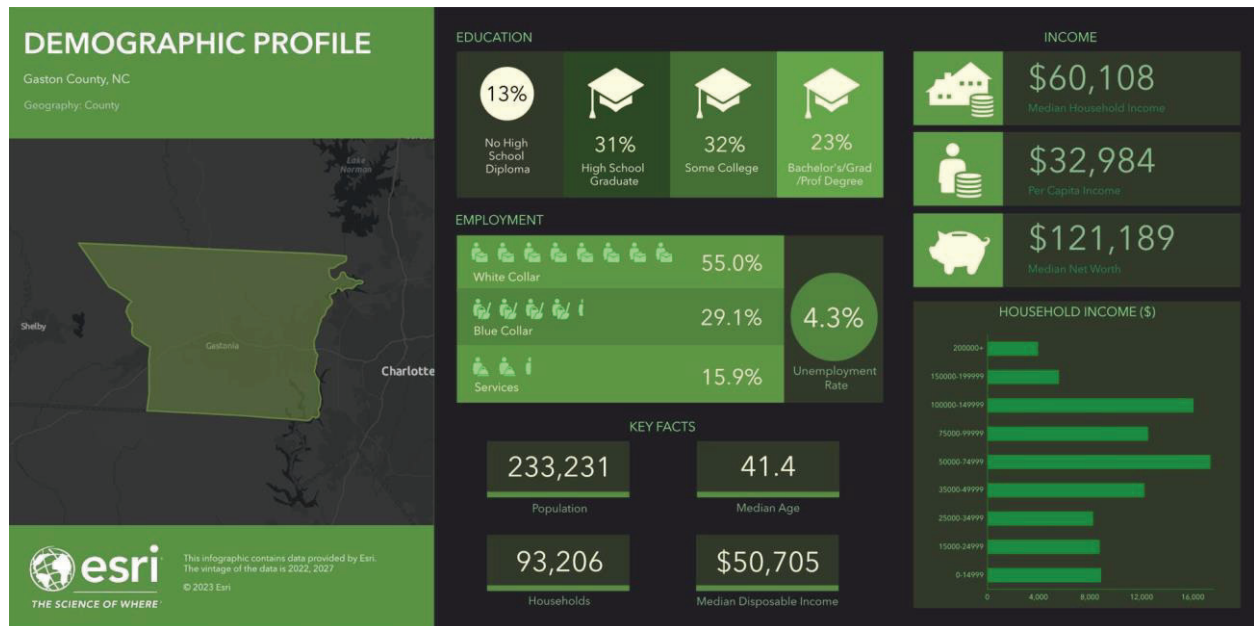
Gaston County closely reflects the statewide average age and trend. The parks master plan is conscious of the fact that the county's population overall is aging and takes into consideration the overall projected demand for facilities and activities that address the wide-ranging needs of patrons of all ages.

## 2.5 Income and Poverty

The County's median household income in 2010-2015 was \$42,158. This was a 6.35% increase over the 2000 median income (\$39,482). Based on current census data (2020) the median household income has increased to \$60,108. This compares to the state median household income in 2020 of \$60,430.

Projecting the percentage of increase in income from 2020-2030, the county's median income in 2030 will be approximately \$85,353. Gaston county has a 4.3% unemployment rate, compared to a 3.3% for the state of North Carolina and 3.8% nationwide. See **Figure 4**.

**FIGURE 4: INCOME DEMOGRAPHICS**

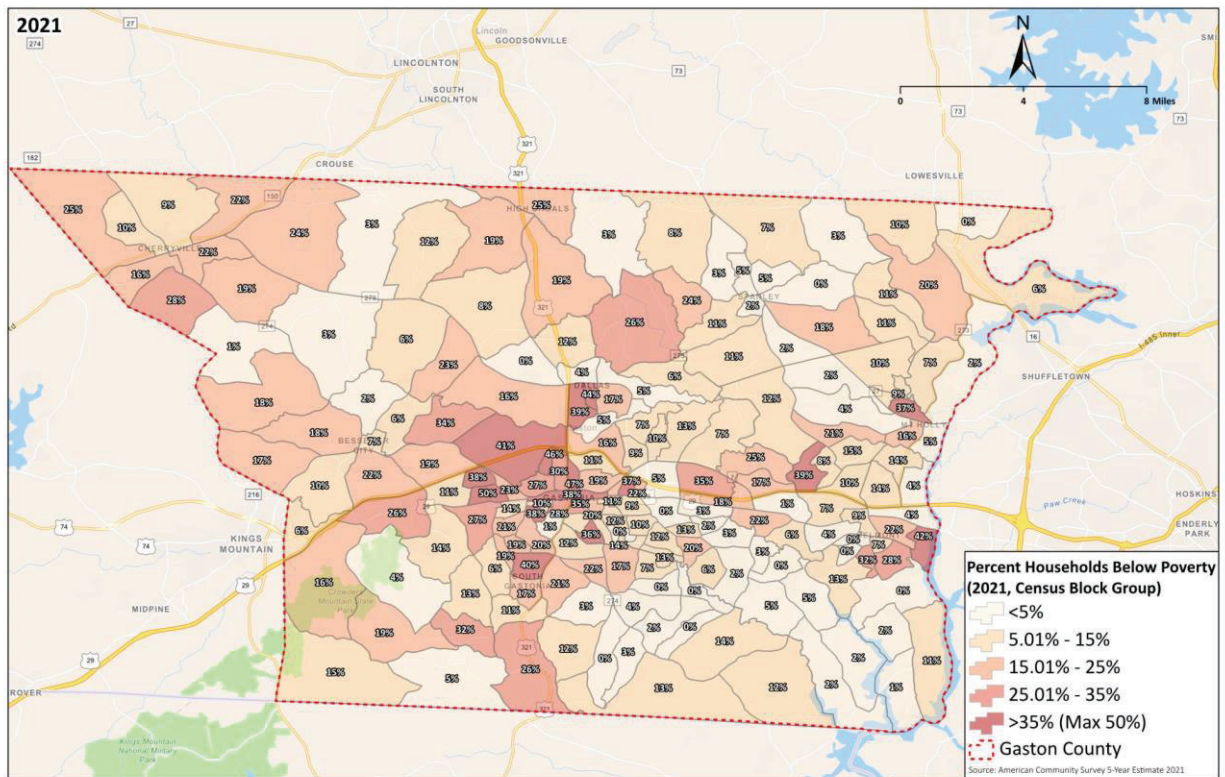


**Figure 5** indicates the percentage of households in each area of Gaston County that fall below the poverty thresholds by family size established by the US Census Bureau. **Table 1** shows the 2020 thresholds for poverty. Thresholds also slightly change based on the age of householders.

Several small areas with elevated poverty levels are located to the north and west of Gastonia, with additional areas with elevated poverty levels distributed around the county. Affordable and accessible parks and amenities may be particularly important in these areas where resources to access opportunities may be potentially constrained.



FIGURE 5: PERCENT OF HOUSEHOLDS BELOW POVERTY



Source: American Community Survey, US Census Bureau

TABLE 1: 2020 POVERTY THRESHOLDS

Size of Family Unit	Weighted Average Thresholds
One person	\$13,171
Two people	\$16,733
Three people	\$20,591
Four people	\$26,496
Five people	\$31,417
Six people	\$35,499
Seven people	\$40,406
Eight people	\$44,755
Nine people or more	\$53,905

Source: US Census Bureau

## 2.6 Planning Considerations

There are several factors relative to the County's demographics that should be considered in developing recommendations for future park and recreation needs. These include:

The county's population is growing. In ten years there will be almost 20,000 additional people living in the county. These additional people will need parks and recreation facilities and programs. In order to maintain the current level of service to county residents, the Department will need to expand parks, facilities and programs by 10% over the next ten years.

The county's fastest growing population is young adults (15-34). Programs for this age group should be considered.

The county's senior population is also growing. Programs, facilities and access for seniors should be considered.

## 2.7 Community Health Initiative

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), through its Division for Community Health (DCH), identified the importance partnerships play in preventing chronic disease and reducing health gaps. The CDC's Healthy Communities Program (HCP) identified three factors that raise the risk of disease. The factors include:

- Physical Inactivity
- Unhealthy Eating
- Tobacco Use and Exposure to Secondhand Smoke

The CDC recommends that there are a wide array of local, state and national organizations (public and private) operational in a community that have some level of responsibilities for improving public health.

Gaston County has several public agencies that have the ability to influence those community health factors listed above. The agencies/organizations include:

CaroMont Health

Gaston County Department of Health & Human Services

Gaston County Parks and Recreation Department

Municipal Parks and Recreation Departments

The underlying theme in this collaborative effort of community stakeholders is that the facilities and programs offered by the Parks and Recreation Agencies operating throughout the county provide many opportunities to improve community health. It should be noted that improving community health is a very complex issue and requires involvement by a wide range of community agencies.



It should also be noted that while improving community health may be a by-product of the facilities and programs offered by the County's Parks and Recreation Department, community health is not the primary focus of the Department.

Areas where the Department can play an important role include:

- Increasing/promoting active lifestyles by providing programs and facilities that encourage physical activity.
- Encouraging healthier diets by offering healthy options at park concession stands and vending machines.
- Increasing/promoting active lifestyles by providing facilities that allow people to become more physically active.

The County's Parks and Recreation Department is currently engaged in all three of these areas and will seek to find additional ways to provide healthy lifestyle options for Gaston County citizens.

Agency collaboration is recognized as an important way to promote community health. Through an ongoing open dialogue between agencies, partnerships will be formed and both facilities and programs will be enhanced.

### 3 OUTREACH AND ENGAGEMENT

Engagement throughout the process included multiple methods for receiving information from various groups and organizations. Interviews were conducted with key staff from the Parks and Recreation Department, followed by two public meetings and a community survey. In addition to the summarized results of the survey included in this chapter, a complete summary report is available for review.

The most important step in the planning process is gathering input from county residents with regards to their desires for public recreation. As part of the master plan process, the following initiatives were taken to gather public input:

**Staff/Stakeholder** meetings were held with parks and recreation staff and the parks and recreation advisory board to discuss the plan and gather information on park needs. Findings from these meetings are included in the Appendix.

**Public Meetings** were held to discuss park and recreation needs with citizens. The meetings focused on gathering input from citizens on park use and recreational needs.

A **Community Survey** to gather input on county citizens' desires for park and recreation facilities was mailed out to a random sample of households in Gaston County. Out of the total surveys sent out 417 households participated in the survey.

The following is a summary of findings from each of the public input initiatives:

#### 3.1 Staff/Stakeholder Meetings

An important aspect of the planning process was gathering information on facility, program, and operational needs from County staff and the parks and recreation advisory board. Meetings were held

to discuss the planning process and allow stakeholders to provide ideas for improving parks and recreation services throughout the county. See Appendix for notes from these meetings.

## 3.2 Public Meetings

On January 23, 2023 and February 4, 2023, information gathering workshops were held to discuss county wide park and recreation facility needs. The meetings were held at the Gaston County Citizens Resource Center and Gaston County Senior Center in Dallas Park. The meeting format was an informal drop-in, allowing attendees an opportunity to review displays providing information on existing county parks and facilities and requesting input on the quality and accessibility of those parks and facilities. Most importantly, attendees were asked to indicate the park and recreation facilities they currently use and identify recreational facilities they believe are needed.

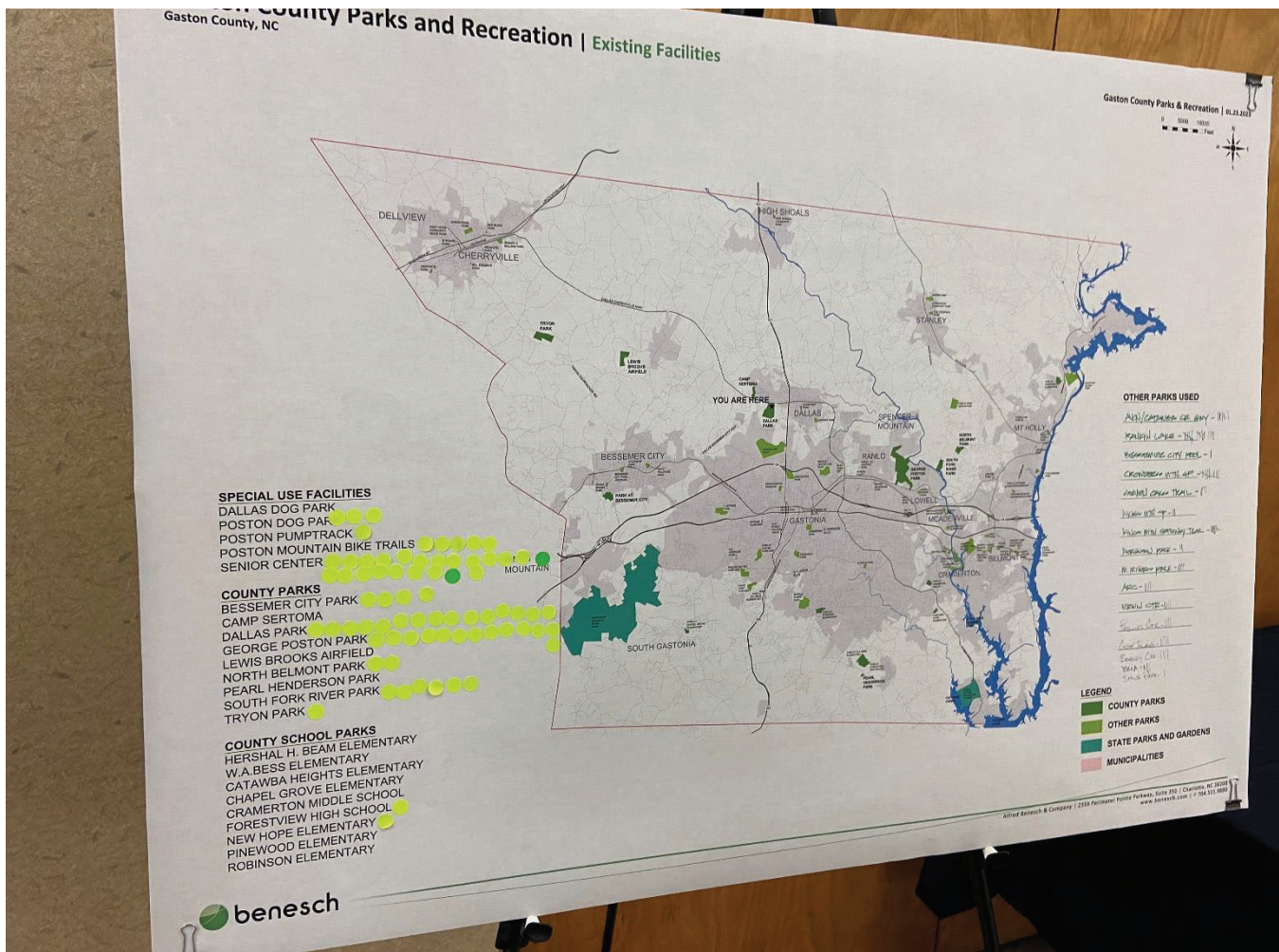
Approximately 50 people attended the two-hour open houses. Overall, most everyone attending the workshops indicated they are currently using existing parks and recreation facilities in the county. Likewise, most attendees felt that the County's parks offer many valuable recreational opportunities. There was a general appreciation for existing facilities, programs, and park operations.

Most everyone attending the meetings expressed a need for additional parks and recreation facilities. The primary focus of those attending the public workshops was on the development of pickleball, senior games, community gardens and walking trails. The overwhelming majority of attendees indicated a current use of walking trails and greenways and indicated a need for expanding trails. Likewise, there was strong support for outdoor music/concerts.

The top recreation activities that attendees indicated a need for expanding included:

- Pickleball
- Senior Games
- Outdoor music/concerts
- Adult fitness and wellness programs

**FIGURE 6: MAP INDICATING EXISTING FACILITIES USED**



Participants were asked to provide information through five specific exercises at the meeting. The focus of these exercises was to elicit responses from individuals regarding the programming/activities and facilities/amenities provided. The first four exercises asked for input in defined and quantifiable ways, while the fifth exercise allowed participants to provide free-form responses relative to their experiences with and exposure to Gaston County Parks.

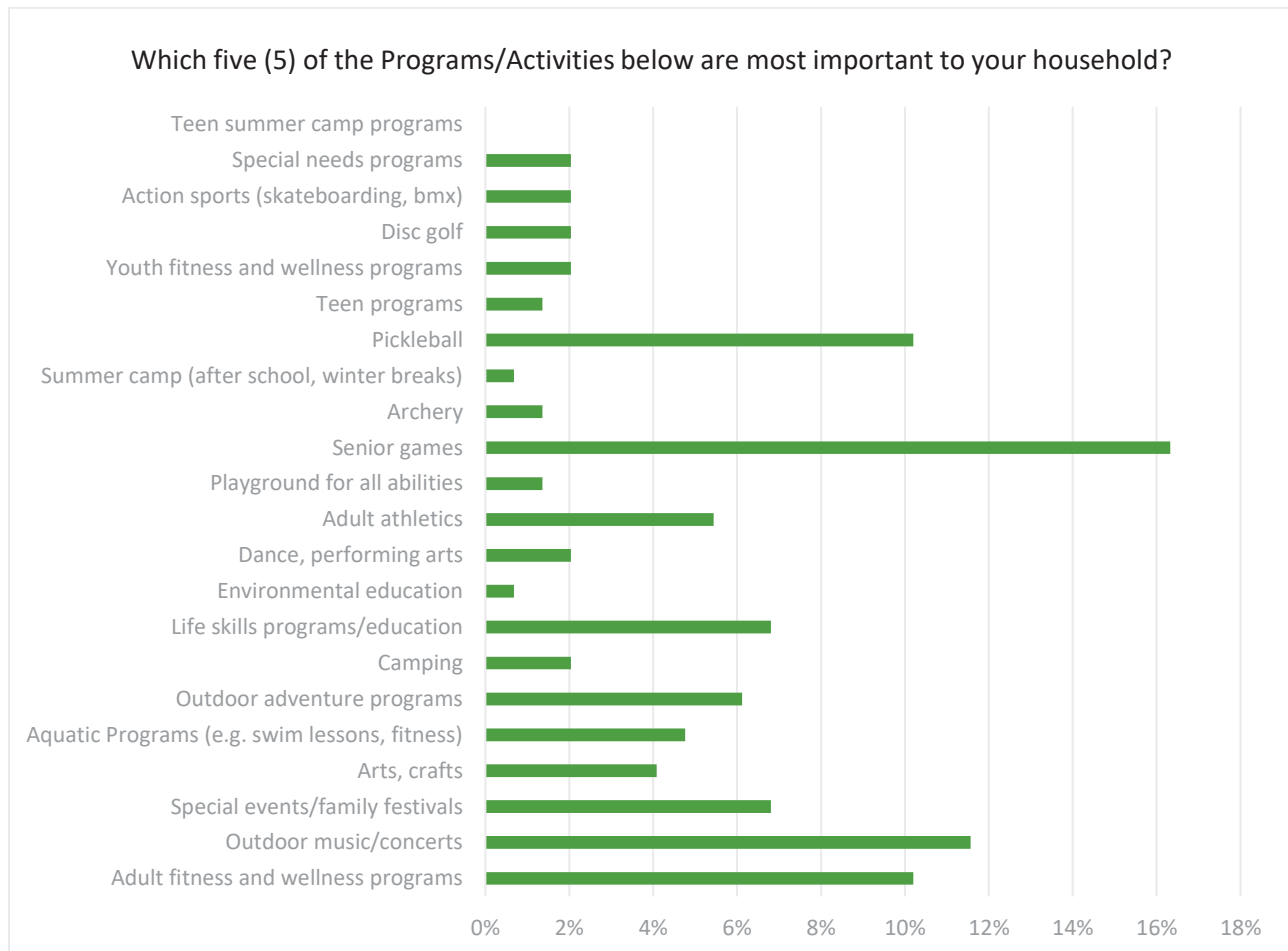
### Exercise 1: What's Important?

The first exercise for the open house meetings asked participants to examine a list of 22 program areas and provide answers for “Which five (5) of the Programs/Activities below are most important to your household?”. To accomplish this, each person was given a supply of dot stickers to place on the appropriate facility or program.

## Programs/Activities

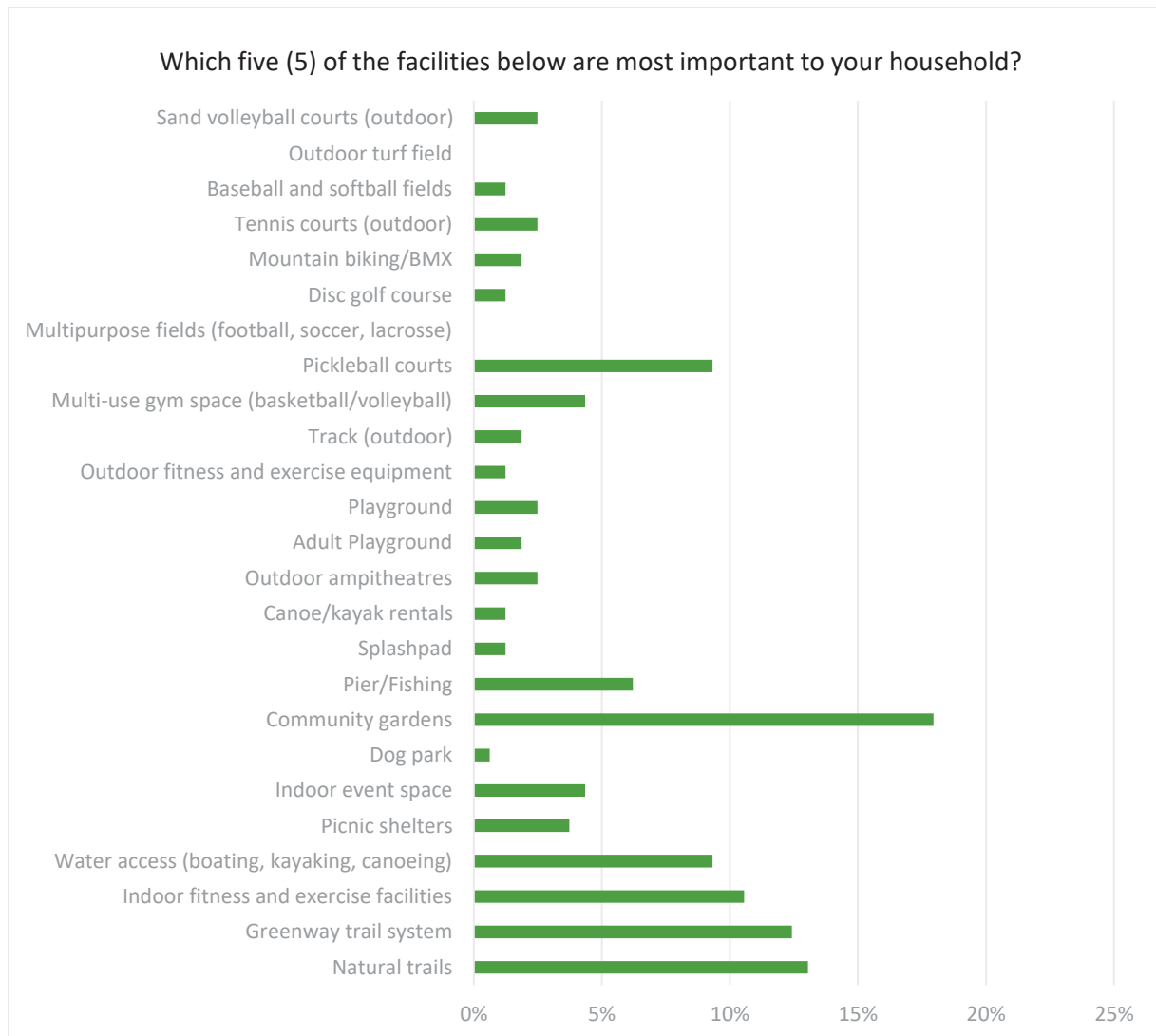
There was a consensus among the attendees in identifying senior games as most important. The next top two programs deemed important were pickleball and outdoor music/concerts. However, it is important to note that one of the community meetings took place adjoining the annual senior games orientation, so the results from the meeting may skew support towards programs or senior events in particular.

CHART 1: COMMUNITY MEETING RESULTS

**Exercise 2****Facilities/Amenities**

Overall, the facilities ranked most important included community gardens, natural trails, greenway trail system and indoor fitness and exercise facilities. This exercise demonstrated that passive park facilities hold strong importance to the residents of Gaston County. Pickleball and water access for canoeing/kayaking were also selected as important to many residents; this finding is consistent with the findings of the other engagement efforts for the Master Plan.

CHART 2: COMMUNITY MEETING RESULTS



### Exercise 3: Why do you visit Gaston County Parks?

The third exercise asked participants to select their top reason as to why they visit Gaston County Parks. The top reason given is 'It's a great place to enjoy nature' with 'It's a great place to hike, bike, walk' and "it's a great place for physical activity" rounding out the highest votes.



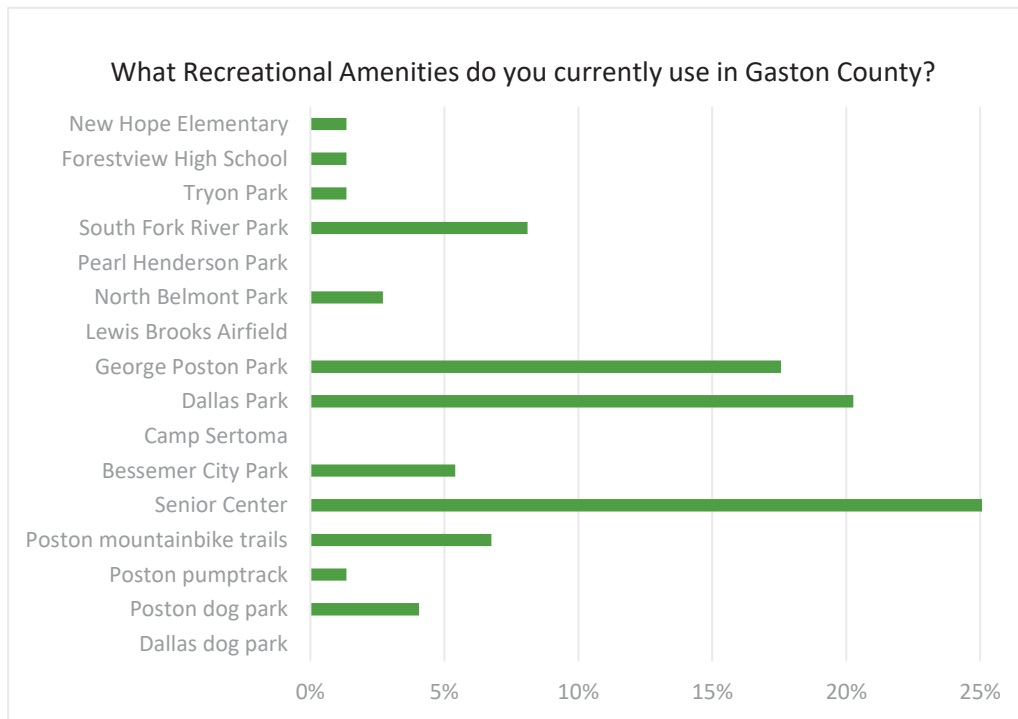
CHART 3: COMMUNITY MEETING RESULTS



**Exercise 4: What Recreational Facilities do you currently use?**

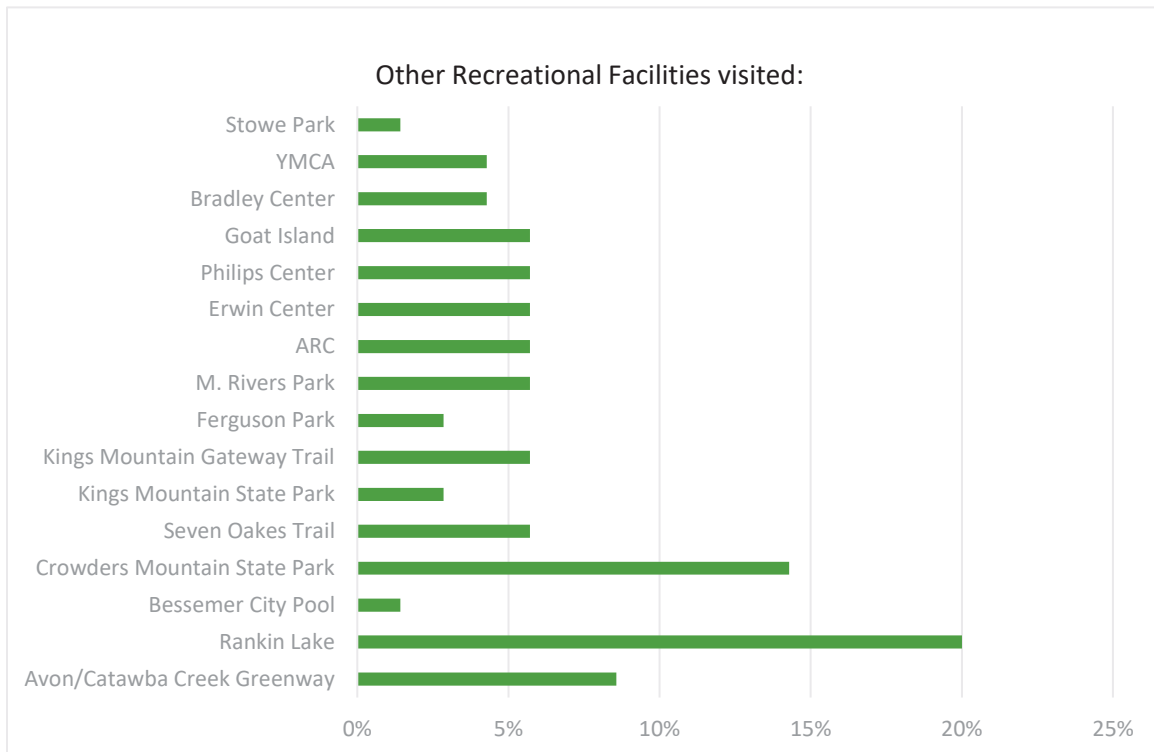
The fourth, and final voting board asked participants to indicate what facilities they used most often in Gaston County or to write in any other facilities, possibly outside the county, that they currently use for recreation. The Senior Center, Dallas Park and George Poston Park were indicated to be the most popular parks.

CHART 4: COMMUNITY MEETING RESULT



Additional facilities listed as write-in votes indicated that Rankin Lake and Crowders Mountain State Park were the most used non-county facilities.

CHART 5: COMMUNITY MEETING RESULT



### Exercise 5: What Other Comments Would You Like to Share?

The third, and final, exercise asked participants to provide written comments. Five themes were identified, and the below list includes the comments received during this exercise.



#### General Programming

*"More variety for arts and crafts, pottery"*

*"Make connection with CPR/Wellness classes"*

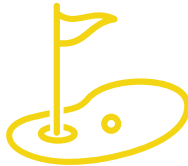
*"Gardening/Horticulture Programs"*



#### Greenway/Blueway

*"Kayaking/Canoeing at Poston Park"*

#### Miscellaneous Outdoor Activities



*"Cornhole"*

*"Trap shooting, sporting clays"*

*"Need places to practice for archery"*



#### Pickleball / Tennis

*"Need outdoor pickleball courts"*

*"Need to better utilize indoor gyms at the community centers for pickleball"*

*"Indoor pickleball courts would be nice"*

*"Add backboard to tennis courts for single players"*



#### Seniors

*"To use senior center, people need to be able to drive or be driven. Shuttlebus?"*

*"Seniors feel safer at the Senior Center, lighting is better than in many of the parks"*

### 3.3 Community Survey

To better understand the community's perception of existing parks and recreation facilities operated and managed by Gaston County Parks and Recreation, and to gather input of recreational needs, a community survey was conducted by ETC. The survey was prepared and distributed by mail to a random sample of Gaston County households. In total, 417 households responded to the survey. The results of the survey can be found in the following charts and the full Parks and Recreation Needs Assessment Survey can be found in Appendix A.

Top takeaways from the survey include:

Overall, the community ranked their satisfaction towards most of the parks as 'very satisfied' or 'satisfied'.

The parks that the community visits the most are Dallas Park and George Poston Park. The least used parks according to the survey are Camp Sertoma and Pearl Henderson Park. When asked a follow-up question, 'Why have you not visited' the answer with the most votes was that they were 'Not aware of the parks or trail's location' and 'Lack of information/don't know what is offered.'

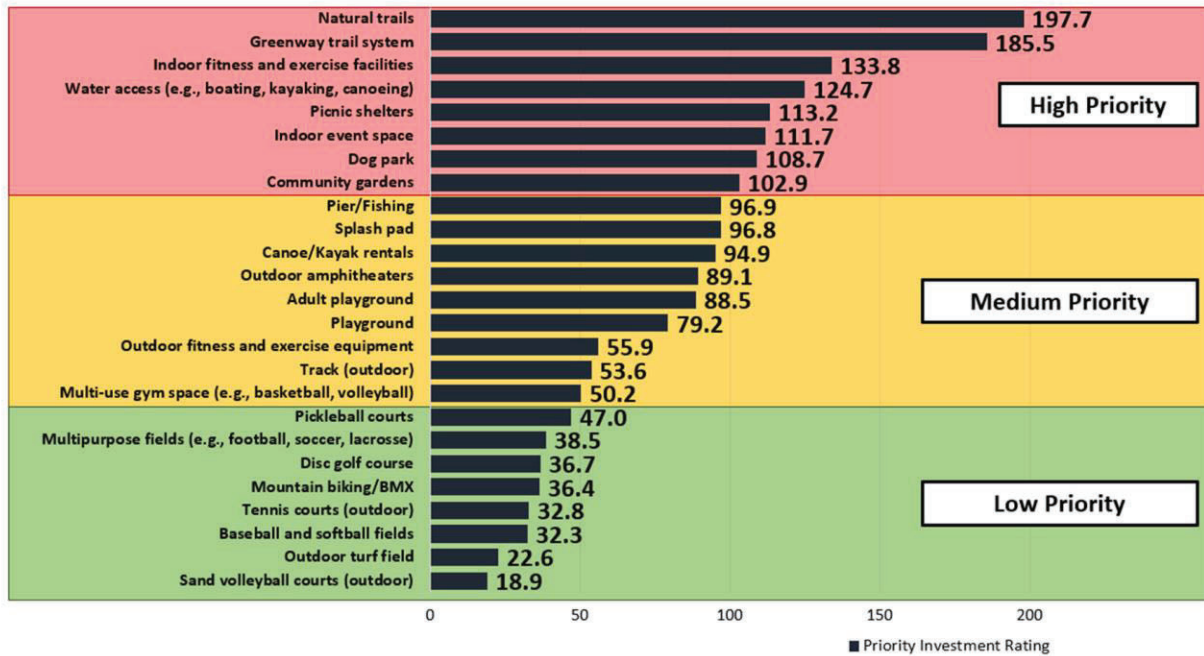
A greenway trail system, natural trails, dog parks and playground were listed as the facilities that are most important to their household.

ETC Institute also evaluated the importance of recreational facilities and the ones that were the 'most important' according to survey responses. The top two most important facilities were Greenway system and natural trails.

Based on residents' needs, unmet needs, and feeling of importance the list below shows the facilities and amenities with Priority Investment Ratings that are considered "High Priority" for investment.

<u>Parks and Recreation Facility/Amenity</u>	<u>Rating</u>
Natural trails	PIR=197.7
Greenway trail system	PIR=185.5
Indoor fitness and exercise facilities	PIR=133.8
Water access	PIR=124.7
Picnic shelters	PIR=113.2
Indoor event space	PIR=111.7
Dog park	PIR=108.7
Community gardens	PIR=102.9

## Priority Investment Rating Analysis: PIR Rating (Recreation Facilities/Amenities)



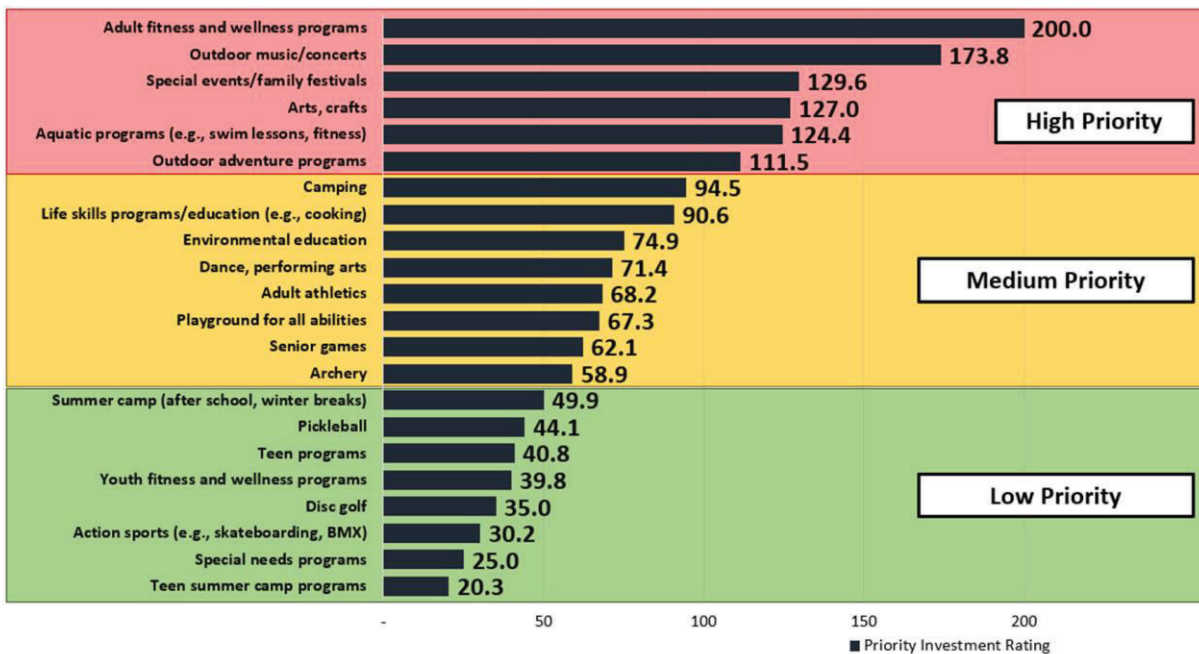
Recreation programs and activities were also addressed in the survey. The importance of recreational programs and activities was rated and the ones that were the ‘most important’ according to survey responses were adult fitness and wellness programs, outdoor music/concerts, aquatic programs, and arts/crafts.

The following shows the “High Priority” Program investment.

<u>Parks and Recreation Programs</u>	<u>Rating</u>
Adult fitness and wellness programs	PIR=200.0
Outdoor music/concerts	PIR=173.8
Special events/family festivals	PIR=129.6
Arts, crafts	PIR=127.0
Aquatic programs	PIR=124.4
Outdoor adventure programs	PIR=111.5



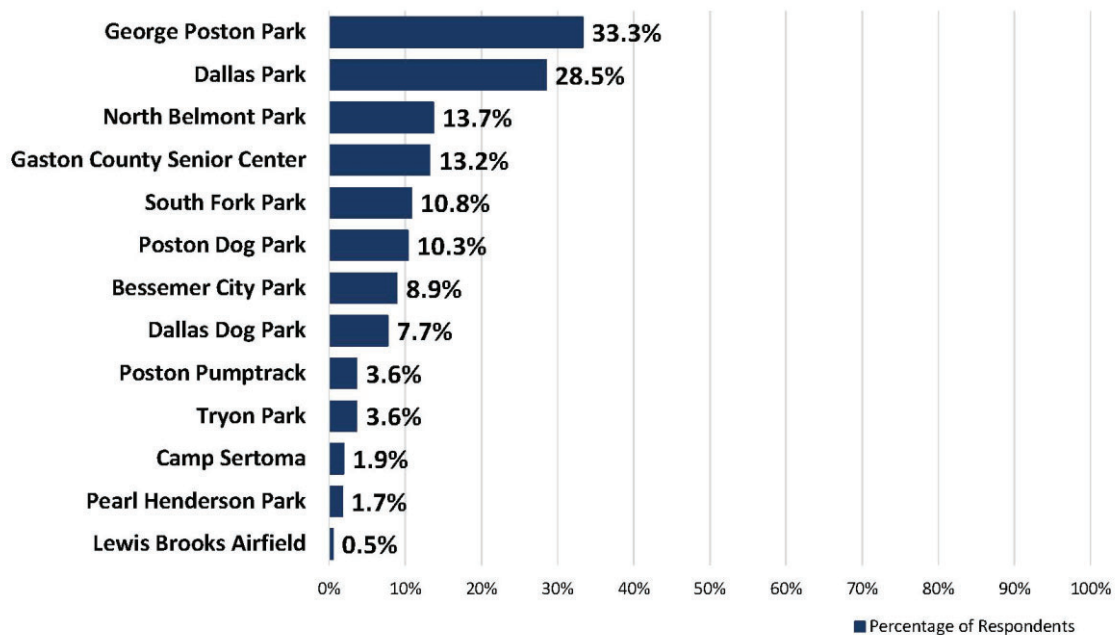
## Priority Investment Rating Analysis: PIR Rating (Recreation Programs/Activities)



The following tables show the results from each survey question. A full result analysis can be found in the Appendix.

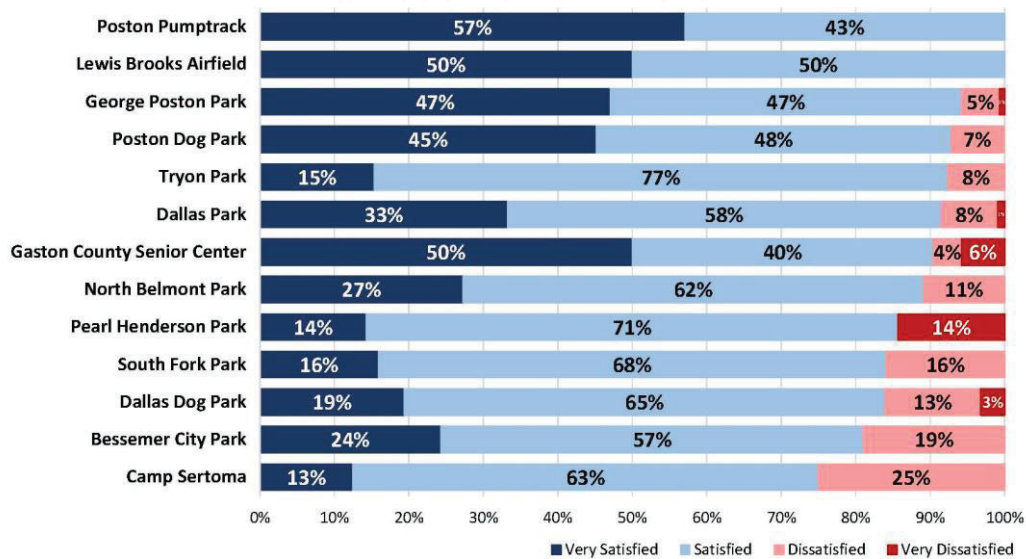
### Q1: Please indicate if you or any member of your household have visited any of the parks or facilities listed below during the past 12 months.

*by percentage of respondents (multiple responses could be selected)*



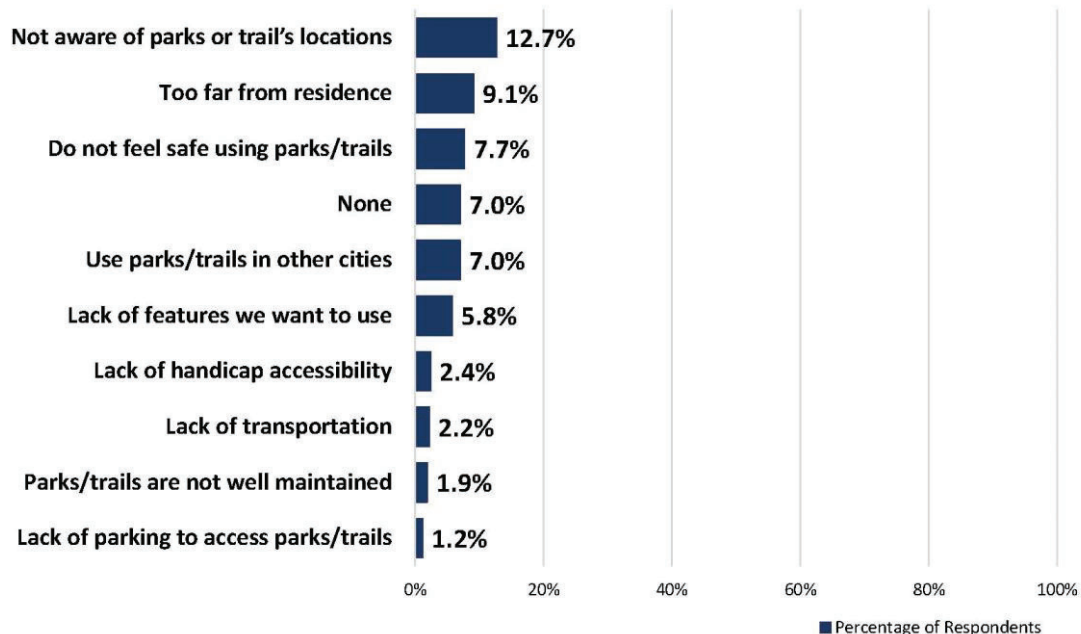
**Q1: If you have visited the park, please rate your overall satisfaction on a scale of 1 to 4, where 4 means "Very Satisfied" and 1 means "Very Dissatisfied."**

*by percentage of respondents (excluding "don't know" responses)*



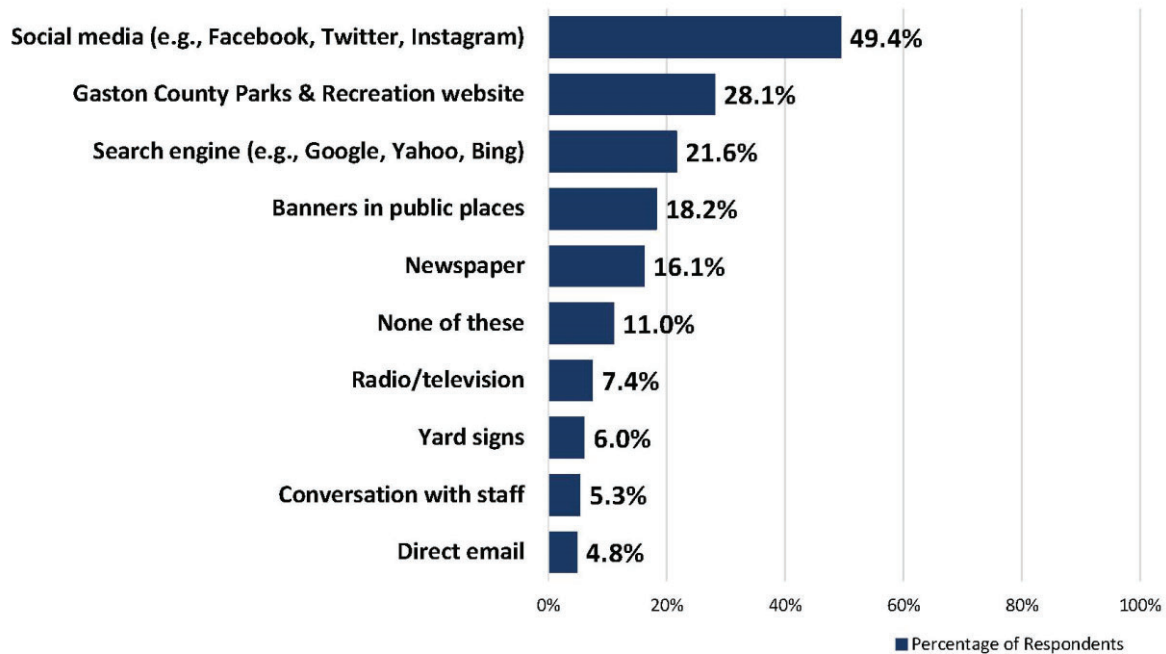
**Q2: If your household has NOT visited any Gaston County parks or trails in the past 12 months, please CHECK ALL of the following reasons you have NOT visited.**

*by percentage of respondents (multiple responses could be selected)*



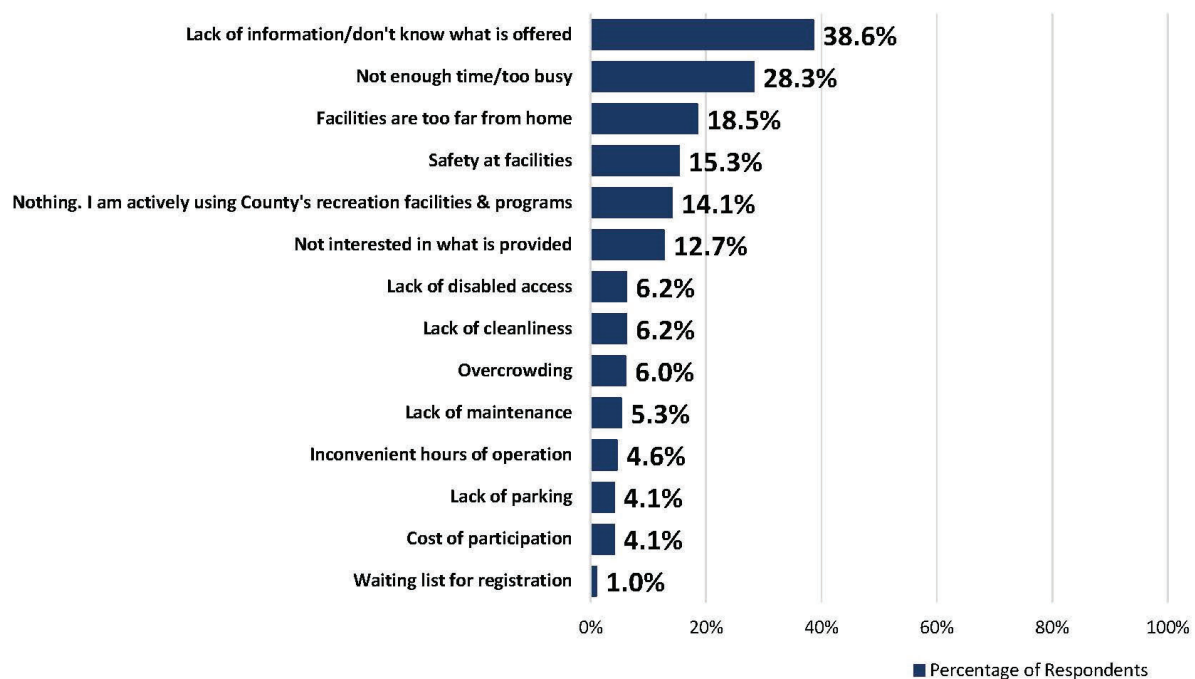
### Q3: From the following list, please CHECK ALL of the ways you learn about Gaston County Parks and Recreation Department programs.

*by percentage of respondents (multiple responses could be selected)*



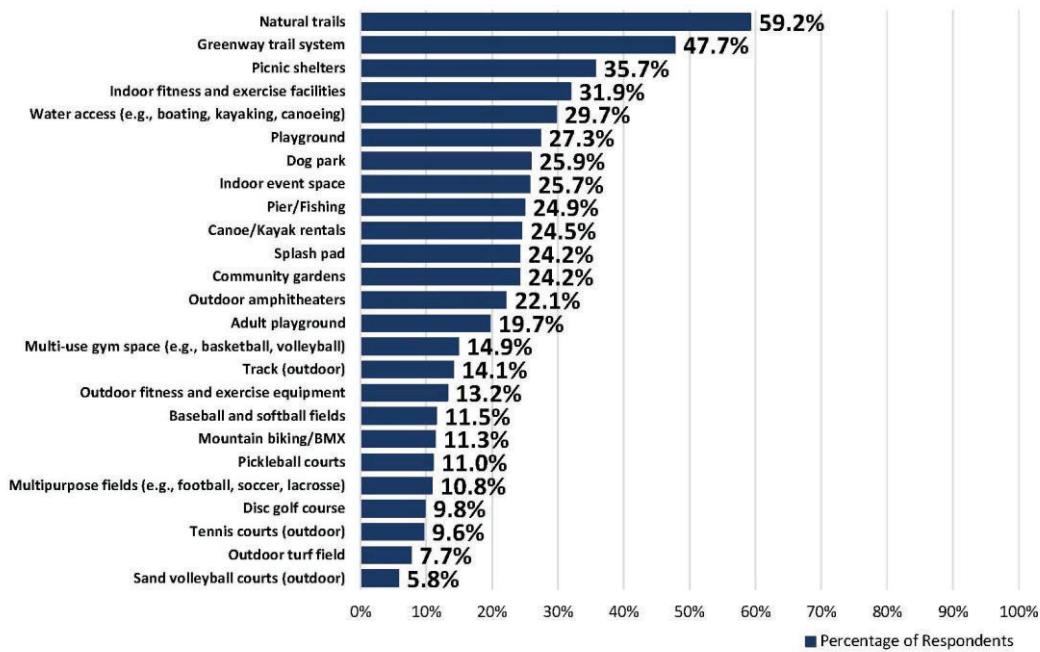
### Q4: All the reasons preventing your household from using Parks

*by percentage of respondents (multiple responses could be selected)*



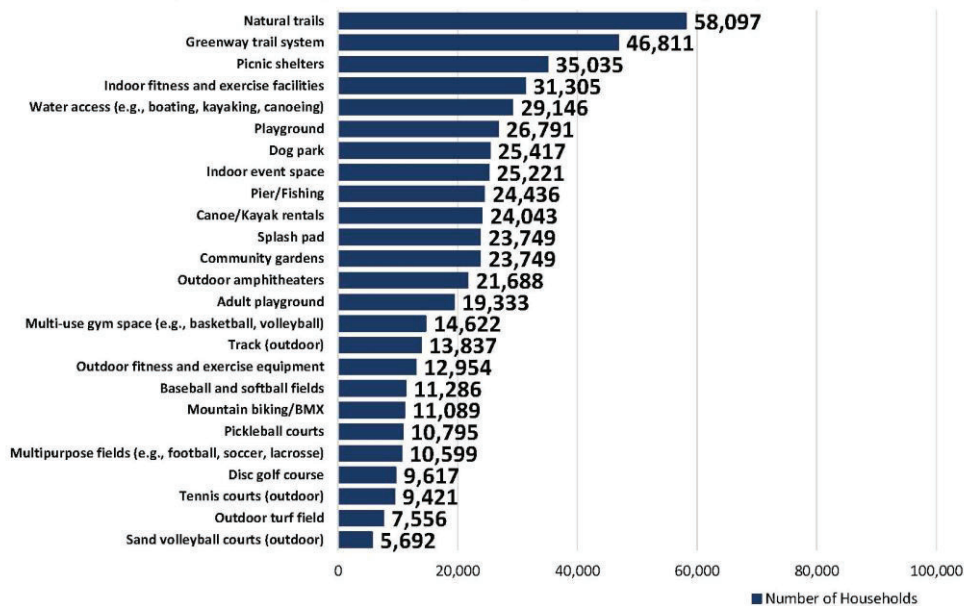
## Q5: Percentage of Households That Have an Interest in Recreation Facilities/Amenities

by percentage of respondents (multiple responses could be selected)



## Q5: Estimated Number of Households That Have an Interest in Recreation Facilities/Amenities

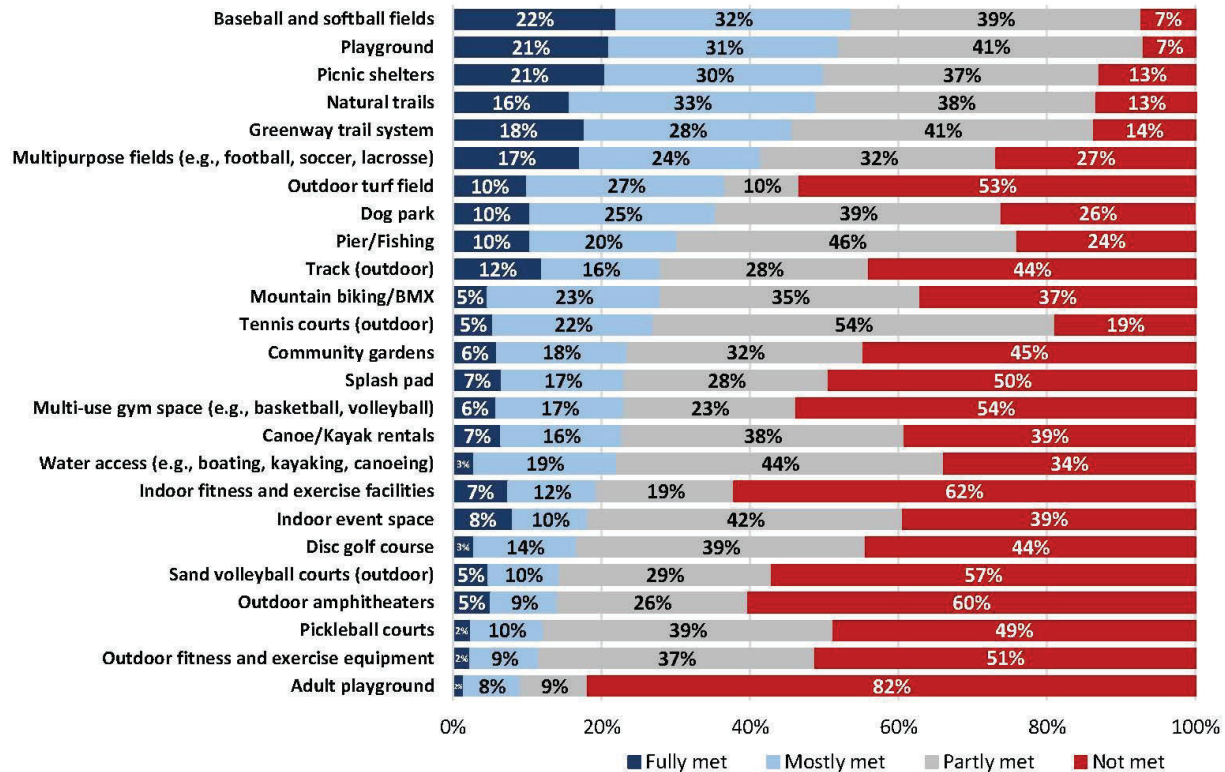
by number of households (based on the estimated number of households in Gaston County, NC= 98,136)





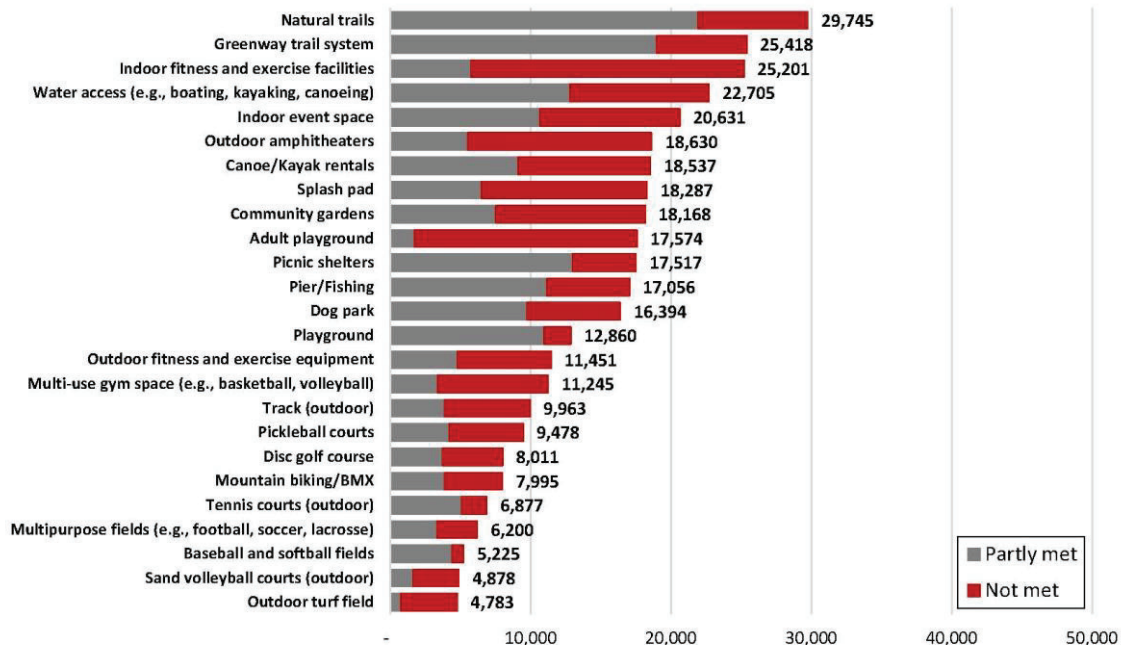
## Q5: If "Yes," how well are your needs being met?

by percentage of respondents that have a need for the following recreation facilities/amenities

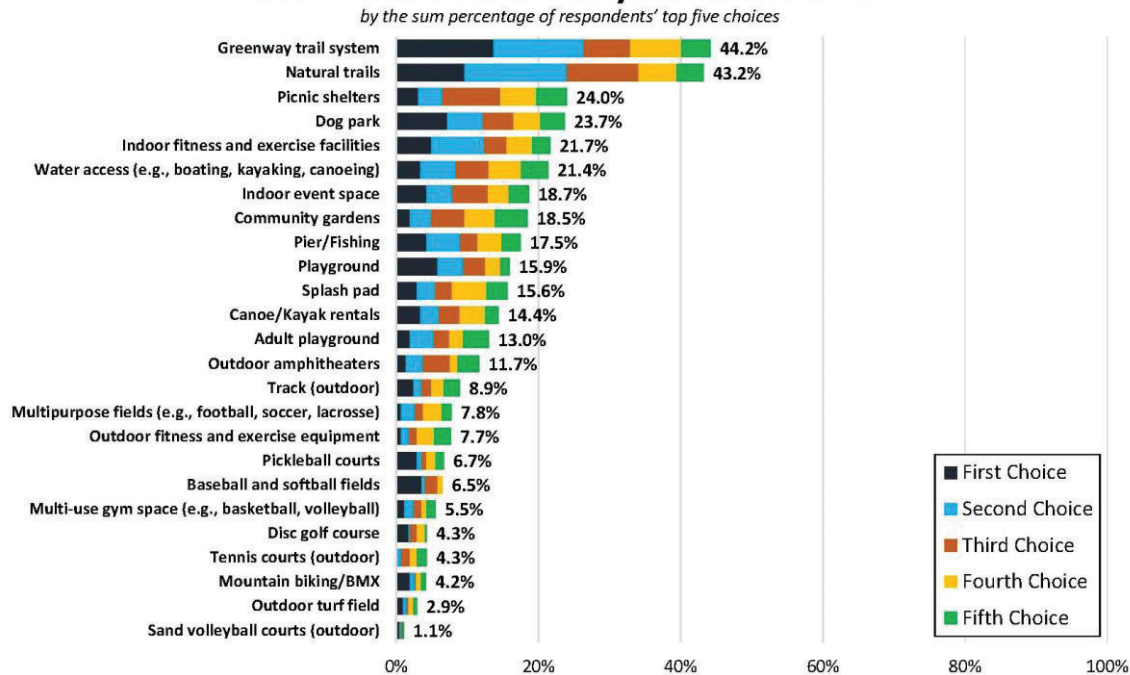


## Q5: Estimated Number of Household Whose Needs Are Being Partly or Not Met

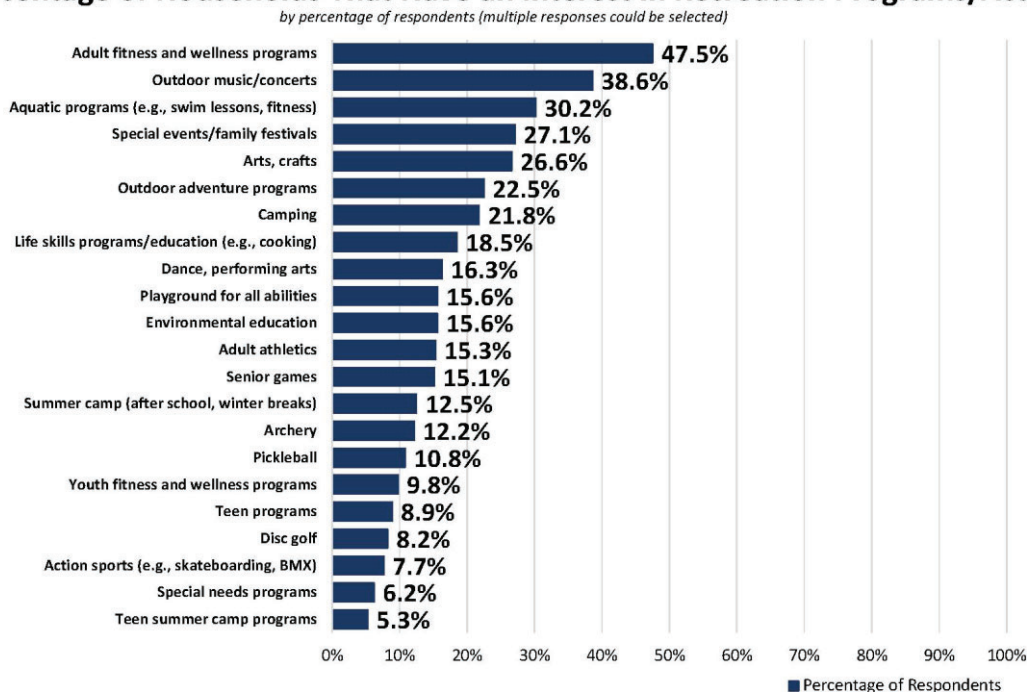
by number of households whose recreation facility/amenities needs are being partly or not met (based on the estimated number of households in Gaston County, NC=98,136)



## Q6: Which FIVE of the facilities or amenities from the list in Question 5 are MOST IMPORTANT to your household?



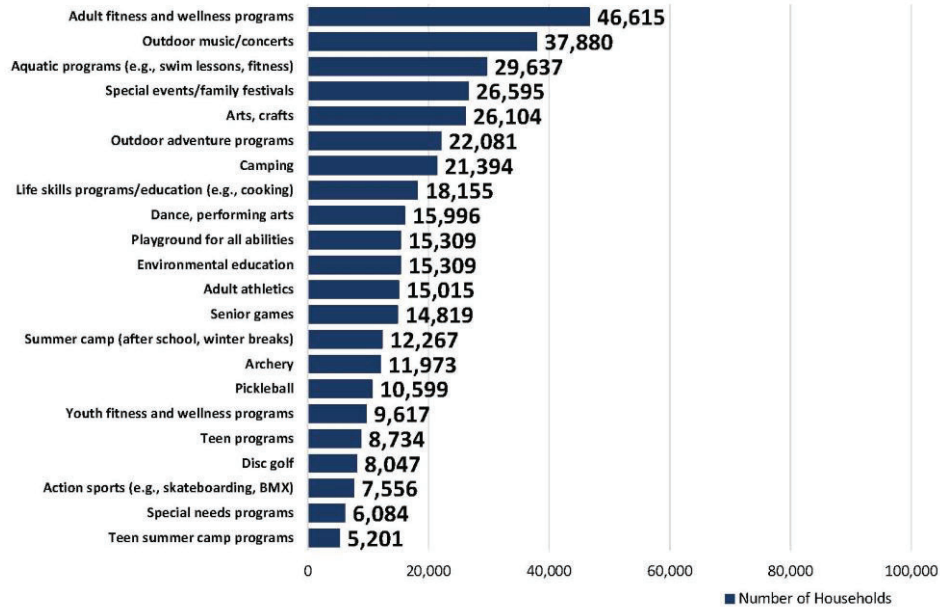
## Q7: Percentage of Households That Have an Interest in Recreation Programs/Activities





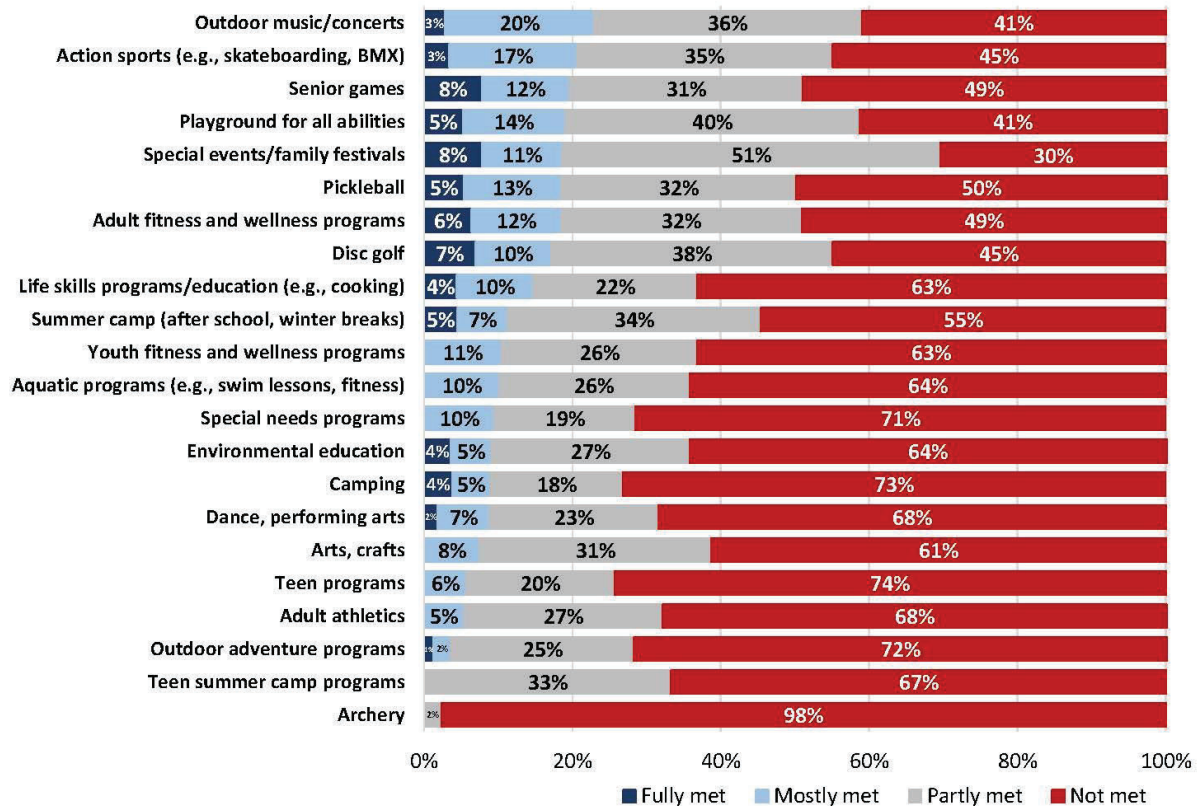
## Q7: Estimated Number of Households That Have an Interest in Recreation Programs/Activities

by number of households (based on the estimated number of households in Gaston County, NC= 98,136)



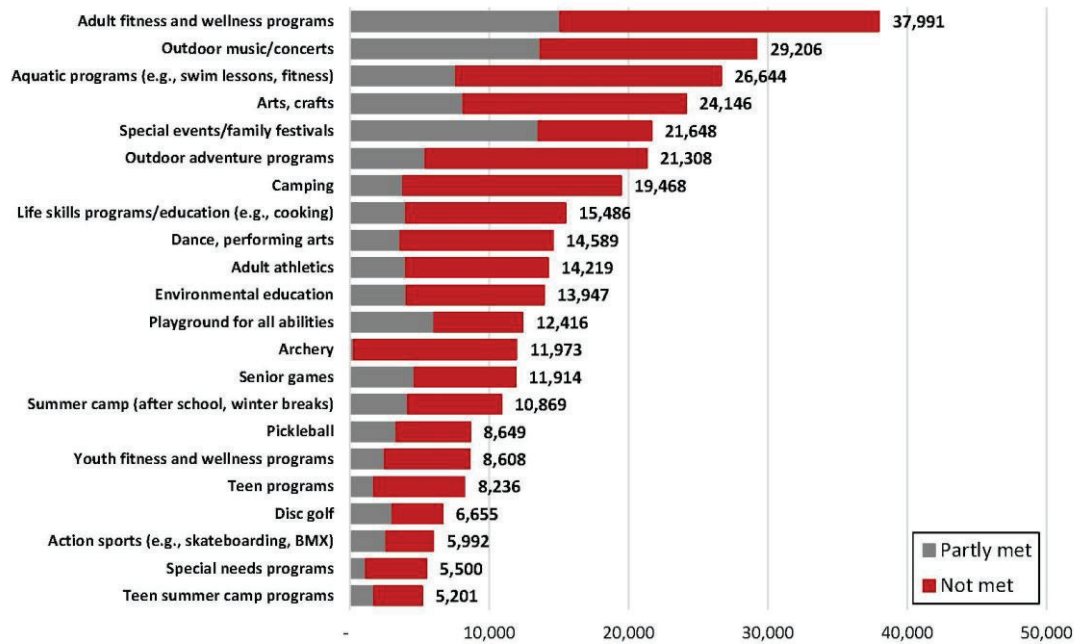
## Q7: If "Yes," how well are your needs being met?

by percentage of respondents that have a need for the following recreation programs/activities



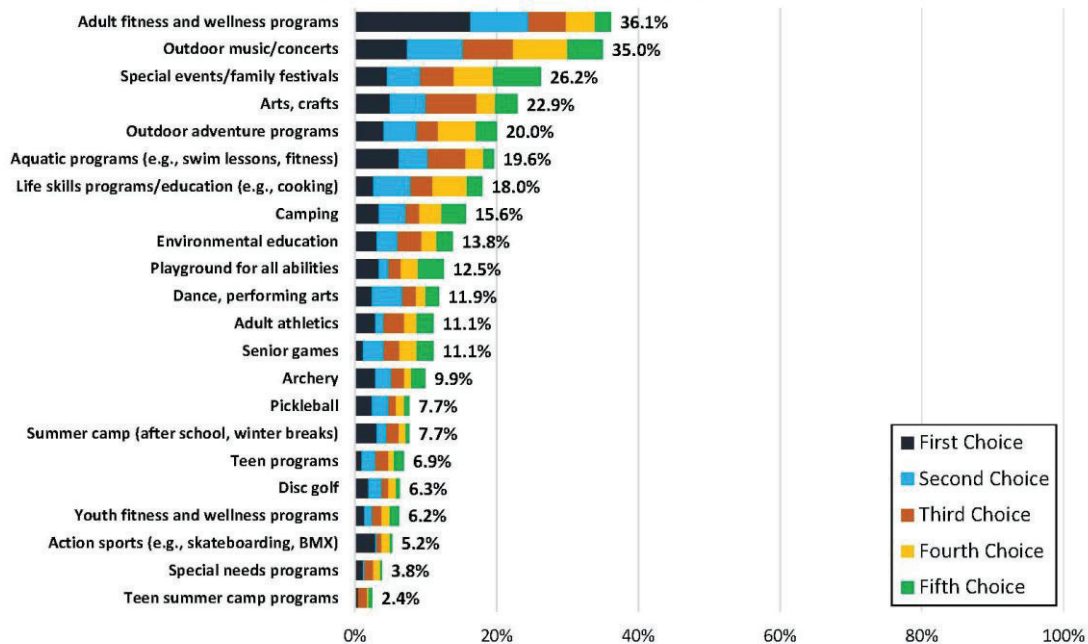
## Q7: Estimated Number of Household Whose Needs Are Being Partly or Not Met

by number of households whose recreation programs/activities needs are being partly or not met (based on the estimated number of households in Gaston County, NC=98,136)



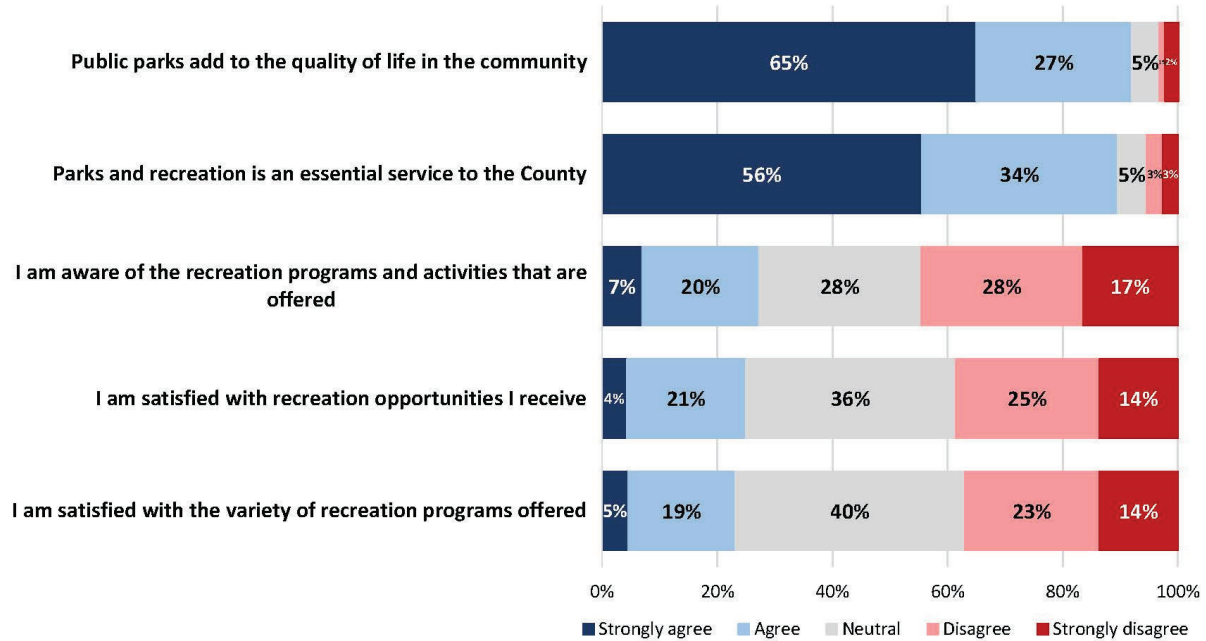
## Q8: Which FIVE of the programs/activities listed in Question 7 do you think are MOST IMPORTANT to your household?

by the sum percentage of respondents' top five choices



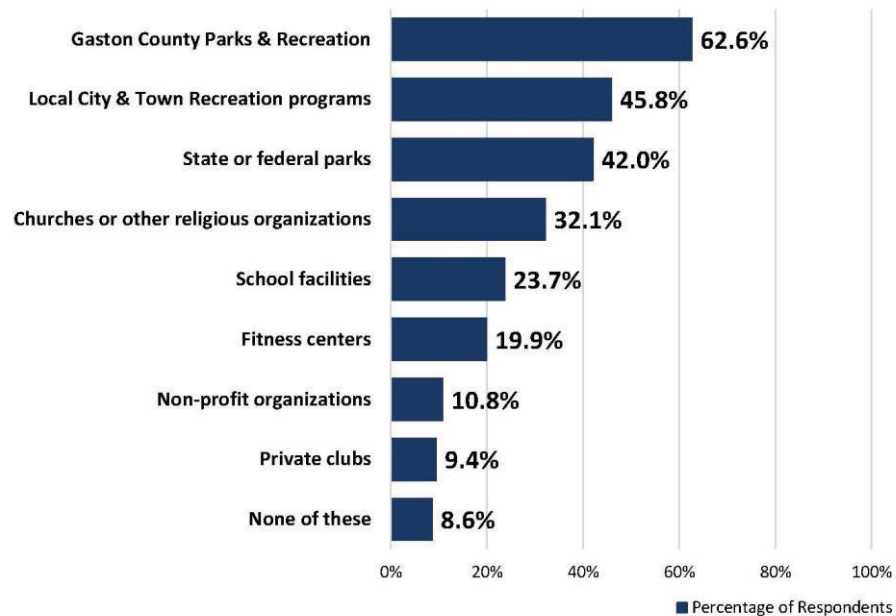
**Q9: Please rate your level of agreement with each of the following statements regarding the Gaston County Parks and Recreation Department, where 5 is "Strongly Agree" and 1 is "Strongly Disagree."**

*by percentage of respondents (excluding "don't know" responses)*



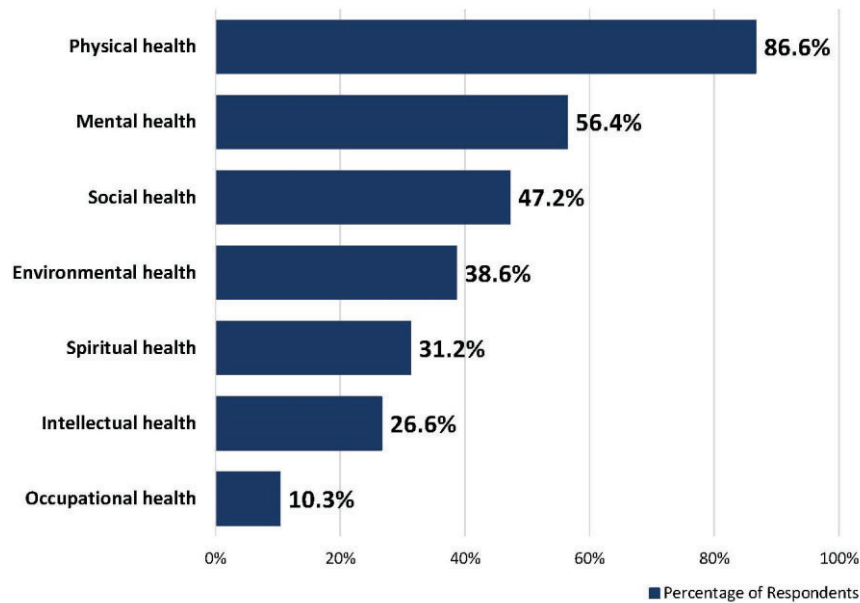
**Q10: Please CHECK ALL of the following organizations that provide the parks, facilities, and programs that you and other members of your household use for recreation.**

*by percentage of respondents (multiple responses could be selected)*



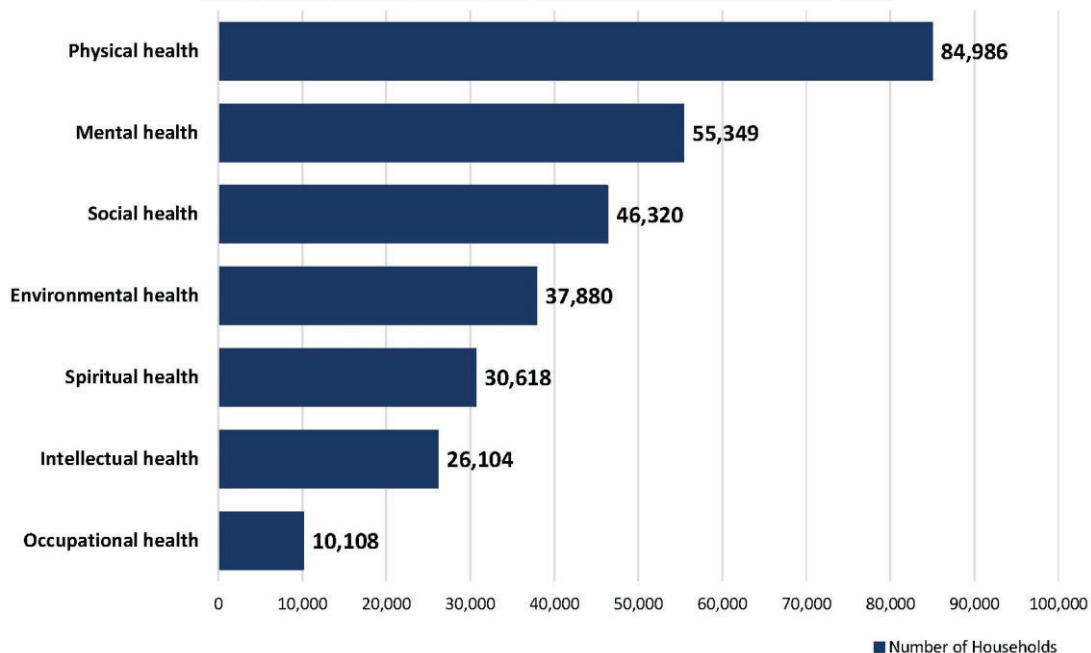
### Q11: Please indicate if you have a desire to use parks, facilities, and programs to meet your health and wellness needs.

*by percentage of respondents (multiple responses could be selected)*



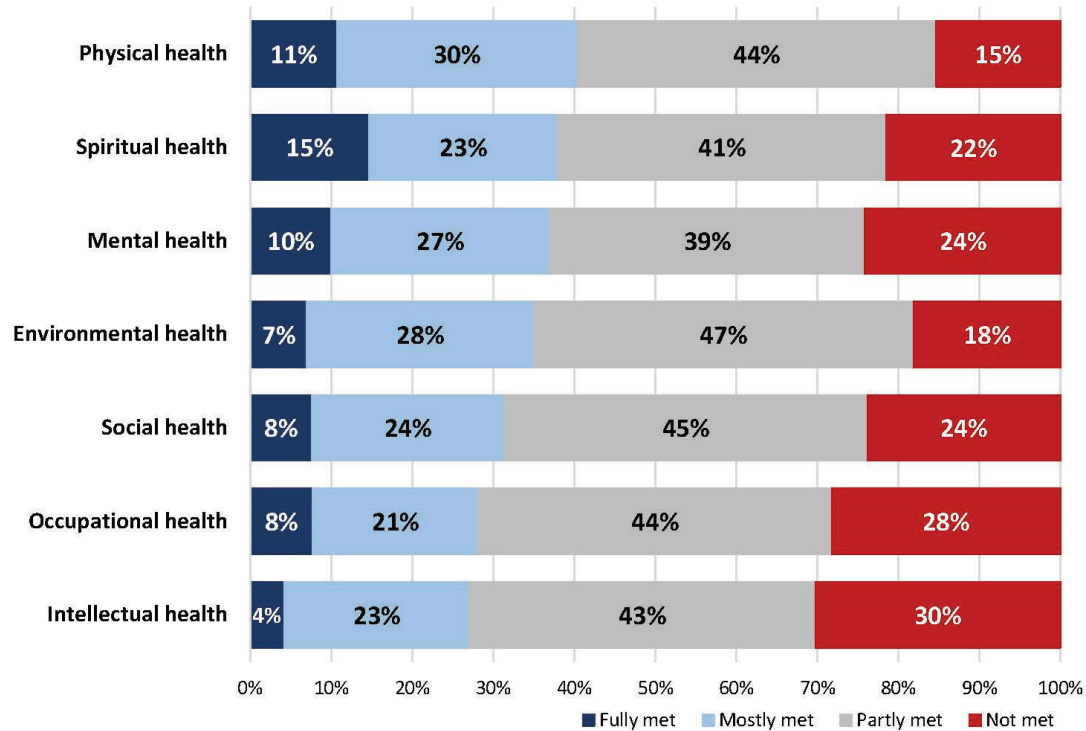
### Q11: Estimated Number of Households Who Have a Desire to Use Parks, Facilities, and Programs to Meet Their Health and Wellness Needs

*by number of households (based on the estimated number of households in Gaston County, NC= 98,136)*



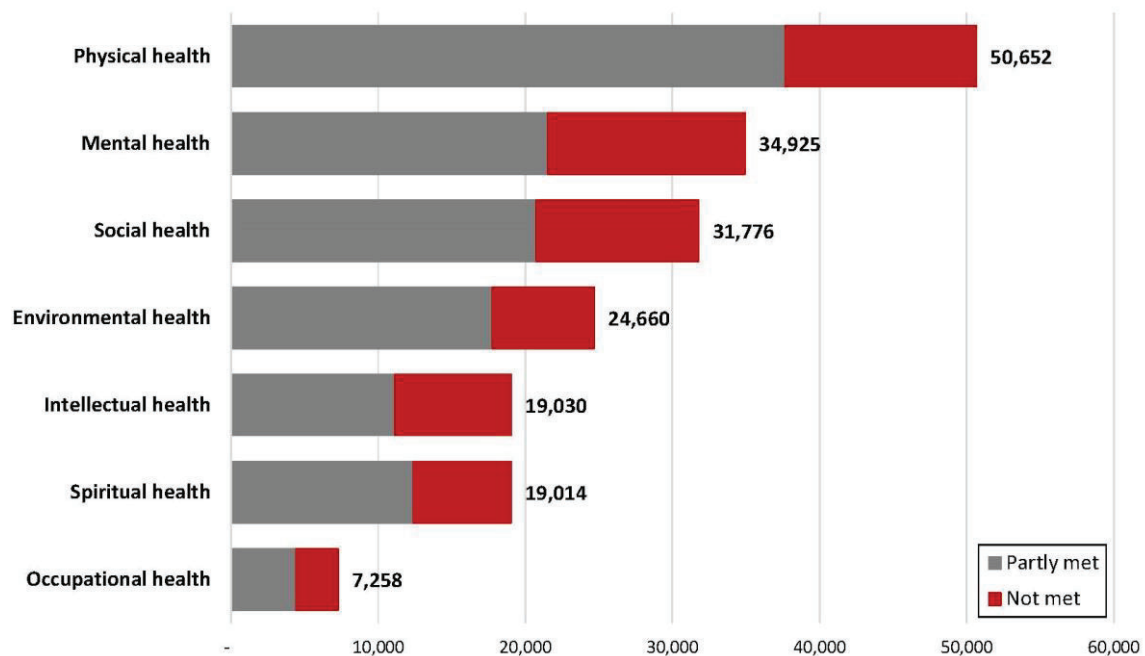
## Q11: If "Yes," how well are your needs being met?

by percentage of respondents that have a desire to meet their health and wellness needs



## Q11: Estimated Number of Household Whose Health & Wellness Needs Are Being Partly or Not Met

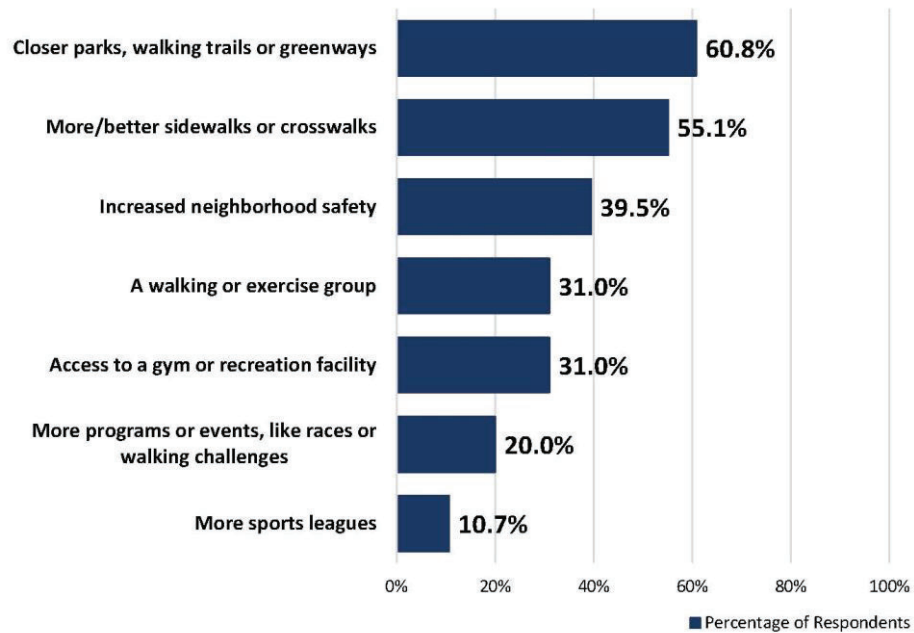
by number of households (based on the estimated number of households in Gaston County, NC=98,136)





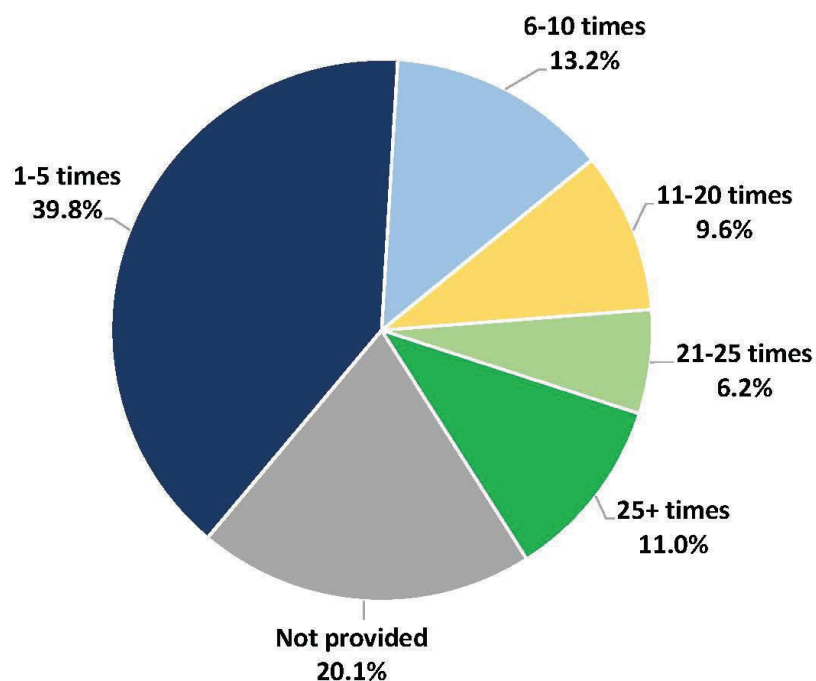
## Q12: Please CHECK ALL of the following that you feel would help you be more physically active.

*by percentage of respondents (multiple responses could be selected) (excluding "none of the above" responses)*



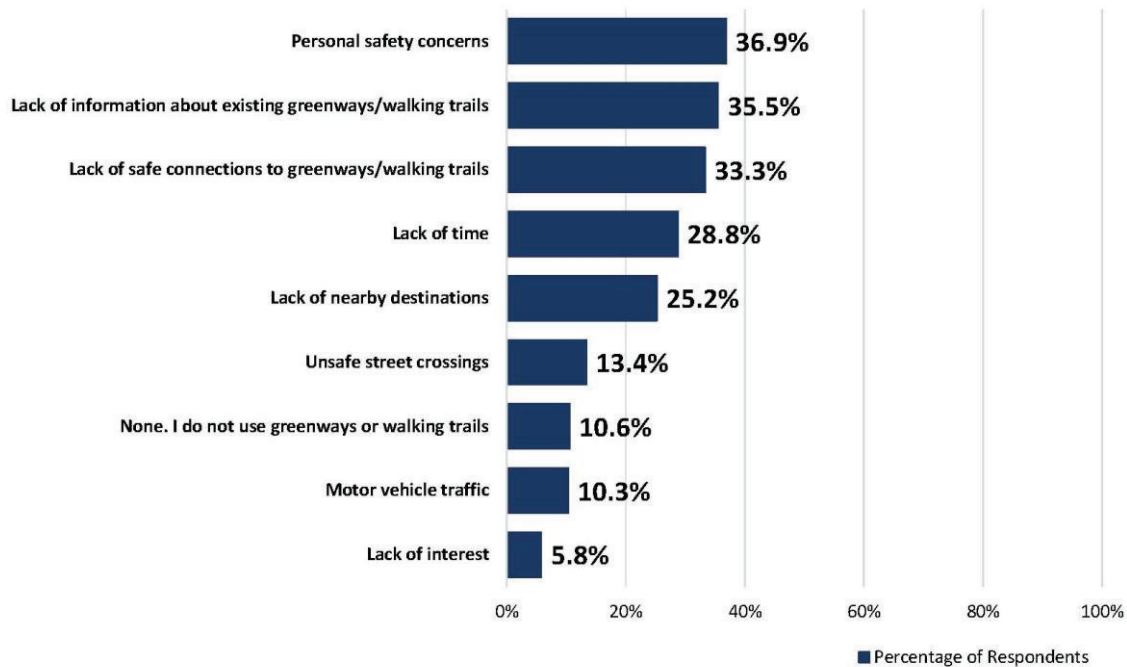
## Q13: In the past 12 months, approximately how many times have you or members of your household visited any greenway or walking trails?

*by percentage of respondents*



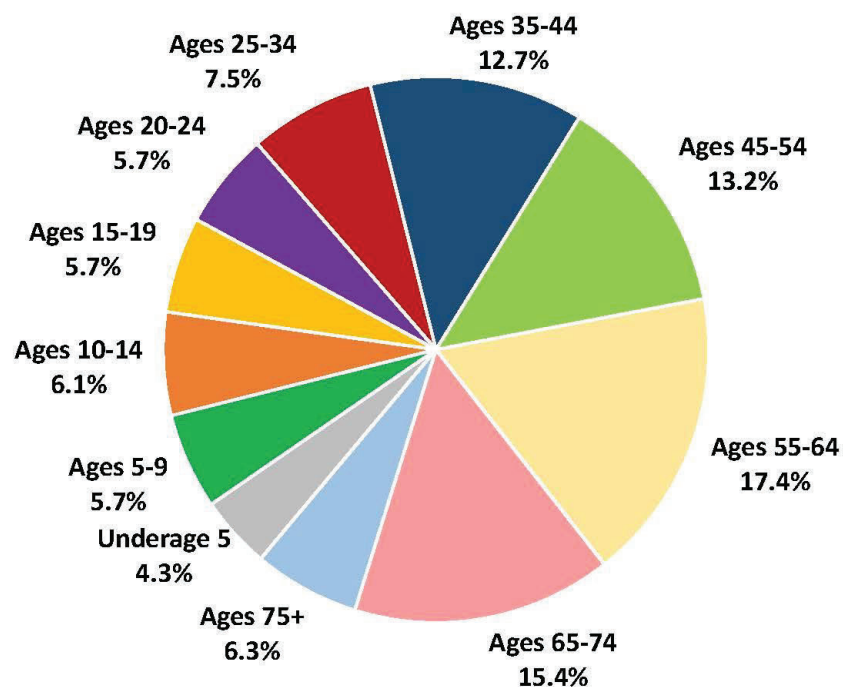
**Q14: Please CHECK ALL of the following reasons that discourage greenway/walking trail use for you or other members of your household.**

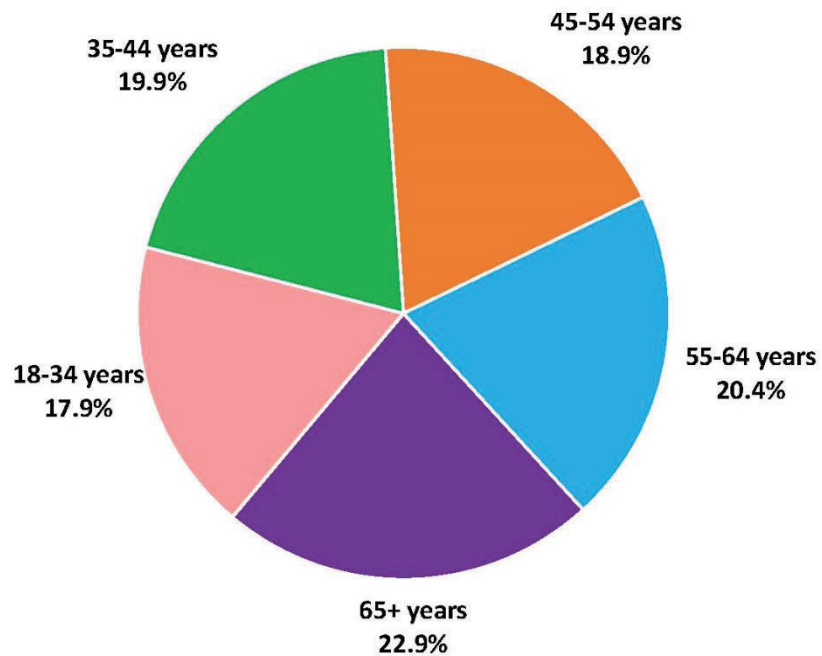
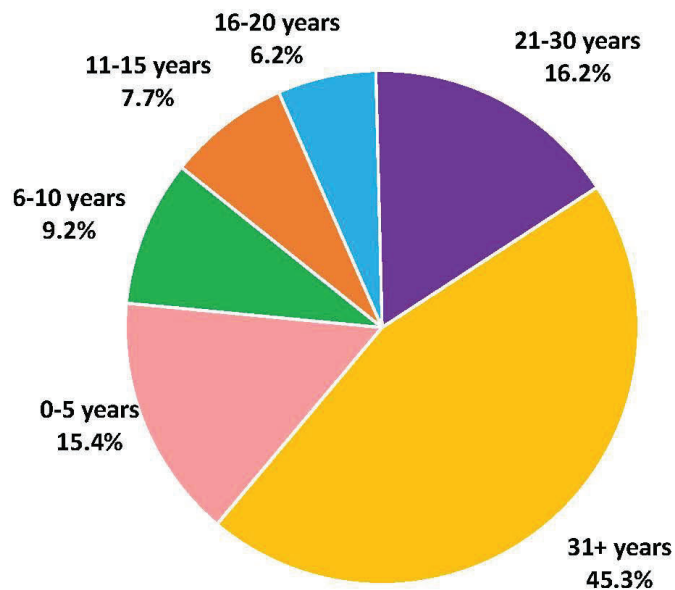
*by percentage of respondents (multiple responses could be selected)*

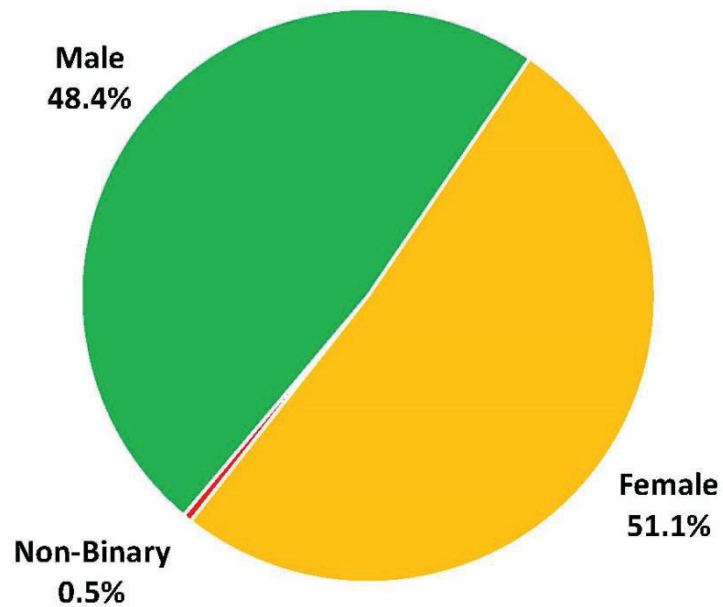
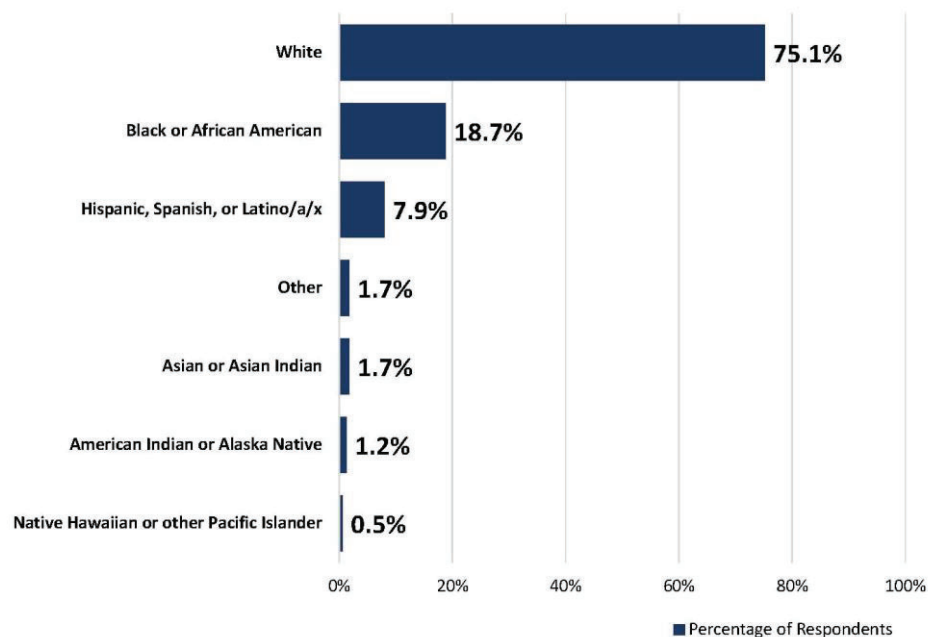


**Q15: Including yourself, how many people in your household are...**

*by percentage of respondents*



**Q16: What is your age:***by percentage of respondents (excluding "not provided" responses)***Q17: Approximately how many years have you lived in Gaston County?***by percentage of respondents (excluding "not provided" responses)*

**Q18: Your gender:***by percentage of respondents (excluding "not provided" responses)***Q19: Please CHECK ALL of the following that BEST describe your race/ethnicity.***by percentage of respondents (multiple responses could be selected)*





**Dallas Park (before splashpad)**

## 4 FACILITY INVENTORY

The first step in the master planning process is to inventory and assess the existing parks and recreation facilities currently serving Gaston County residents. With the current demand on County resources, it is extremely important to identify and utilize existing facilities to their fullest potential. While this report makes note of existing municipal parks in Gaston County, its focus is on Gaston County managed and maintained parks.

Most of the public parks located in Gaston County are owned, managed, and operated by municipalities. These facilities include parks located in Belmont, Bessemer City, Cherryville, Cramerton, Dallas, High Shoals, Gastonia, Lowell, Mount Holly, Ranlo, and Stanley. Many of these parks fall into the Community Park (20-40 acres), Neighborhood Park (5-20 acres), and Mini Parks (1-2 acres) classification. These existing municipal parks provide a good platform for recreational activities for citizens living within the municipalities.

Gaston County Parks and Recreation Department operates one Regional Park, one District Park, six Community Parks, one Neighborhood Park, and two Special Use Facilities. These parks are larger than most municipal parks and provide opportunities for citizens living in unincorporated areas. In addition to their parks, the Department also operates a senior center located at Dallas Park.

Gaston County Schools (GCS) is another major provider of recreation facilities throughout the county. The County's Parks and Recreation Department has joint use agreements with GCS and offers programs and provides maintenance for 10 school park facilities. This collaborative effort is critical to meeting the recreational needs of the citizens.



Another important park provider in Gaston County is through North Carolina State Parks, which operates Crowders Mountain State Park in Kings Mountain.

Finally, the private sector offers recreational activities throughout the county. These private sector options range from outstanding golf courses, private swim clubs and residential amenity areas operated by homeowner associations. These non-governmental provided recreation opportunities are an important component in meeting recreational needs of county residents.

This section identifies the existing parks and recreation facilities currently serving the citizens of Gaston County. Special attention is provided to parks managed and maintained by Gaston County, including a list of recommended improvements for each park.

## 4.1 Programs & Events

The Gaston County Parks and Recreation Department provides a wide variety of community events and programs throughout the year. The following events have been held or are scheduled for 2023:

- Paws in the Park
- Kids Catfish Tournament
- Cruise In's
- Park after Dark Family Camp Out
- Cotton Ginning Days
- Halloween Fest
- Stanley Creek Massacre 5K/10K
- 1890s Historic Christmas Village
- Senior Games

## 4.2 Existing Facilities Inventory

Summarized below are the findings by the planning team of the existing conditions assessment by each Gaston County park or facility, in addition to listing the following general characteristics:

- Location – address
- Parks Classification – based on the size and diversity of park uses, a park is classified as one of the following:
  - Mini-Park: Generally, 5 acres or less in size with limited activity and that typically provides seating, landscape and possibly a playground, a community garden or other passive recreation activities.
  - Neighborhood Park: Generally, 5 to 20 acres in size providing more intense recreational activities, such as playing fields, larger playgrounds, shelters, trails, swimming pools, etc.
  - Community Park: Generally, 20 to 75 acres in size and typically serving as an all-inclusive facility for recreation users (from sports fields to community center) that provides a mix of active and passive activities and attracts users of all ages.

- Regional Park: Generally, 50 to 250 acres in size and providing a unique outdoor recreation area with various amenities, which potentially include boating, fishing, swimming, and camping; may also be a water park, etc.
- Amenities – list of specific amenities provided by the park.
- Programs – list of specific programs offered at the park.
- Observations / Recommendations – this list of observations and actions items are based on the field review conducted by the Project Team as well as comments received during the public outreach and engagement activities.



### DESCRIPTION

This 90-acre park includes some of the most unique amenities in the Gaston County Park system. The park has equestrian facilities including a horse arena with riding ring, show control building, concession building, and 5 barns with stalls for 124 horses. For anglers, there are three fishing lakes. Six lighted tennis courts are available for public and league use.

A four-field softball/baseball complex is available for public, and tournament use, and park users can also take advantage of a one-mile walking trail and playground equipment. For concerts and community events, an amphitheater with a lovely view of one of the lakes is offered. The park is a popular destination for picnics, with two large and two small lakeside picnic shelters.

History buffs will want to visit the historic village, which includes a 19th century barn, house, and schoolhouse. The village also includes a period chapel and blacksmith shop. One permanent exhibit in the park is an operational 1900 single-stand, continental cotton gin. The cotton gin roars to life during Cotton Ginning Days, an annual festival held the second weekend of each October.

### AMENITIES

- Ball Fields
  - Lighted softball fields (3)
  - Little league field (1)
- Picnic Facilities
  - Large, covered shelters (2)
  - Small, covered shelters (3)
  - Picnic pads with tables (8)
- Equestrian facilities
  - Show ring
  - 124 stalls
  - Concession/Restroom
  - Control building
- Other Facilities
  - Play Equipment
  - Restrooms
- Amphitheater
- Three Lakes (fishing)
- 1-mile Walking Track
- Walking / Jogging Trails
- Six Lighted Tennis Courts, Two of which are painted for pickleball.
- Fitness Pavilion
- Dog Park
- Splash Pad
- Concession/Restrooms
- Heritage Village
  - Mule Barn
  - Cotton Farmer's House
  - Blacksmith Shop
  - Chapel
  - Col. Morris Kitchen
  - Smoke House
- Machine Shop
- School House in 2011

### OBSERVATIONS / RECOMMENDATIONS

- Renovations to existing athletic fields
- Construction of multipurpose building
- Amphitheater cover
- ADA improvements



## DESCRIPTION

Located in the western part of Gaston County, this 38-acre park is adjacent to Bessemer City Middle School. The park has three softball-baseball fields, one full size baseball field and one soccer-football field, two picnic shelters, and a playground.

**Current challenges and opportunities** for the park include no ADA accessibility for the park's playground and only limited ADA accessibility to the park's other amenities due to steep terrain.

## AMENITIES

- Ball Fields
  - Lighted baseball field (1)
  - Lighted softball field (1)
  - Lighted little league fields (2)
  - Lighted Soccer/Football field (1)
- Picnic Facilities
  - Covered shelters (2)
- Other Facilities
  - Walking/Jogging track lighted play equipment
  - Restrooms

## OBSERVATIONS / RECOMMENDATIONS

- Restroom improvements
- ADA improvements
- Landscape improvements
- Splash Pad
- Disc golf
- Soccer field irrigation

## CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

- ADA accessibility for playground







### DESCRIPTION

This 33-acre park is located in the northeastern part of Gaston County. The park has two soccer fields, a lighted walking track, and two softball-baseball fields, a nature trail, playground, and three picnic shelters.

**Current challenges and opportunities** for the park include limit ADA accessibility and pedestrian access to the park.

### AMENITIES

- Ball Fields
  - Lighted softball field (1)
  - Lighted little league field (1)
  - Lighted soccer/football field
  - Soccer/ Football field – unlighted
- Picnic Facilities
  - Covered shelters (3)
  - Picnic pads with tables
- Other Facilities
  - 0.5-mile track
  - Play Equipment
  - Restrooms

### OBSERVATIONS / RECOMMENDATIONS

- ADA accessibility







## DESCRIPTION

Tryon Park is a 40-acre park near Cherryville which serves as an athletic destination for residents in the county. Tryon Park has a lighted walking track, 4 baseball fields, one softball field, one soccer field, a new concessions/restroom building, a playground, and 2 shelters.

**Current challenges and opportunities** for the park include limited ADA accessibility.

## AMENITIES

- Ball Fields
  - Lighted softball fields (2)
  - Lighted little league fields (3)
  - Lighted soccer/football field
- Picnic Facilities
  - Small covered shelters (2)
  - Picnic pads with tables (4)
- Other Facilities
  - Lighted 0.25-mile walking/jogging track
  - Play equipment
  - Restrooms



## OBSERVATIONS / RECOMMENDATIONS

- Provide ADA accessibility for playground





## DESCRIPTION

South Fork River Park is a 44-acre river front park which serves as a neighborhood destination for residents of the county. South Fork River Park provides a 1-mile trail loop that takes you down to the South Fork Catawba River for fishing, picnicking, and scenic outlooks.

**Current challenges and opportunities** for the park include no ADA accessibility down to the river. Trails are well maintained but does have a couple areas of run-off.

## AMENITIES

- 1-mile natural surface trail
- Porta John restroom
- Access area for canoeing, kayaking, fishing and picnicking
- 800 feet of river frontage

## OBSERVATIONS / RECOMMENDATIONS

- Run-off issues in locations
- Porta-John replacement







### DESCRIPTION

Fairview George Poston Park is the County's largest park at 328 acres. The property for the park was a gift from the late Edith Poston, given in memory of her late husband, George Poston. Mr. Poston used the parkland for recreation pursuits and Mrs. Poston wanted people to always enjoy the beauty of the property.

The park currently includes four soccer fields, four softball/baseball fields, 24 lighted horseshoe courts, and two playgrounds, 12-acre lake with a fishing pier, one small and one large picnic shelters, an off-leash dog park, and a sand volleyball court.

We also have 8 miles of single-track mountain bike trails. Recently added a paved greenway on the South Fork River side of the park.

Future plans include a park office, conference center, hiking and equestrian trails, and canoe access to the South Fork river.

### AMENITIES

- Ball Fields
  - Lighted softball/little league fields (4)
  - Lighted soccer fields (4)
- Volleyball court
- Picnic facilities
  - Small, covered shelter (1)
  - Large, covered shelter (1)
- Other Facilities
  - 2 batting cages
  - Dog park
  - 0.5-mile paved greenway
  - Pumptrack
  - 12 miles of multiuse trail
  - Horseshoe complex
  - Playground equipment
  - Fishing Lake w/ pier
  - Lakeside ADA paved walkway

### OBSERVATIONS / RECOMMENDATIONS

- xx

***DESCRIPTION***

Pearl Henderson Park is a 5.57-acre park in Gastonia which serves as an neighborhood park for residents in the county.

Named after a teacher who spent most of her life in the community, the park offers a baseball field and 2 Soccer/Multi-purpose fields.

Current challenges and opportunities for the park include limited ADA accessibility for the park's amenities and lack of lighting in the park.

***AMENITIES***

- Ball Fields
  - Little league field (1)
  - Soccer fields (2)

***OBSERVATIONS / RECOMMENDATIONS***

- ADA accessibility
- Restroom Upgrade
- Add inclusive playground
- Add walking path/loop within park.
- Pave parking area
- Add sidewalks





### **DESCRIPTION**

Camp Sertoma is a special use park located in Dallas. The 10-acre facility features a screened-in lodge with a large kitchen. Primitive camping cabins are available for groups. The Park also has nature trails, outdoor picnic tables and a gazebo. The entire park is used by reservation only.

### **AMENITIES**

- Other Facilities
  - 0.2-mile trail
  - Picnic facilities, covered and screened-in
  - Kitchen facilities





### ***DESCRIPTION***

Radio-controlled flying enthusiasts have this 55-acre park in the western part of Gaston County to enjoy their sport. The park features a paved runway for airplanes to take off and additional space for planes to fly safely. Entrance to the park is controlled; please call the department for additional information.

### ***AMENITIES***

- Other Facilities
  - Radio controlled airplane flying
- Restroom
- Shelter with Tables

### ***OBSERVATIONS / RECOMMENDATIONS***

- Paved ADA parking space and accessible route to the runway have been added.







### **DESCRIPTION**

550-acre property earmarked for use as a passive recreation facility. The property is located off of New Hope Rd. in southeastern Gaston County. It is located along a portion of the Catawba Creek, which flows south into Lake Wylie. As an undeveloped vacant property, it is heavily wooded with a mix of hardwoods and pines. There are also areas of steep topography. There is an existing single track natural surface forest road that connects from Armstrong Rd. (adjacent residential neighborhood) south through the property to Catawba Creek

### **PROPOSED AMENITIES**

- greenway and/or nature trails
- Mountain Bike areas
- Support facilities (parking, restrooms, etc.)
- Viewing point and benches along the trail
- Canoeing/kayaking opportunities

### **OBSERVATIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Carefully plan development as not to disturb the site and protect the vegetation and the creek
- ADA access may prove to be a challenge
- Utilize the topography when designing trails and connections



***DESCRIPTION***

68-acre property to be leased to Gaston County by Duke Energy for use as a passive recreation facility. The property is located off Boat Launch Rd. in Belmont.

***AMENITIES***

- Boat ramps (2)
- Fishing piers (2)
- Swimming beach
- Picnic pads
- Large shelter

***PROPOSED AMENITIES***

- Canoe/kayak launch
- Camping

***OBSERVATIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS***

- Carefully plan future development as not to disturb lake buffer
- ADA access may prove to be a challenge
- Utilize the topography when designing campsites and circulation



## 5 ASSESSMENTS

This section contains the analysis and assessment on which the recommendations of this Parks and Recreation Master Plan Update are based. This section begins with a brief review of previous plans that have been developed that are relevant to the recommendations for this planning study. The planning process also includes a review of other North Carolina counties and the Level of Service (LOS) they use to provide parks, recreation facilities, and senior centers to their constituents. This review of service levels is based on a description of the park classifications that typically make up a park system (Appendix B). Using these park types as a backdrop, we establish a desired LOS for park and recreation facilities specifically for Gaston County. This LOS is then used as a basis for establishing a park and recreation facility Needs Assessment for the County. Since these assessments were made and included in the 2017 Parks and Recreation Master Plan, only a summary and any relevant updates will be included in this section.

It should be noted that the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) has determined there are no “national standards” for park development. The NRPA recommends that each community is unique, and that standards reflecting the local “uniqueness” should be established, with an eye toward other counties/communities of similar size. This section utilizes input from the public workshops and the county wide survey, as well as a comprehensive review of other North Carolina counties to develop LOS specifically for Gaston County.

This study looks at several types of service levels. First, we evaluate total acreage of park land within the service area and how this acreage is broken into park types. This report will review the current county-owned park land and planned acquisitions for future park land. From this analysis it is possible to compare the parks in Gaston County with other counties, both in overall park acreage and park types within this overall acreage.

The second analysis in this section looks at recreation activities and the facilities required to program these activities. By establishing a population-based LOS for various recreation activities, this study establishes the type and quantity of facilities the County should develop in the future.

A third analysis of service in this section is an assessment of special use facility needs. The level of information on these special use facilities is somewhat more limited than the other park and recreation facilities, and more complicated because of the cost of construction and operation. This section includes a discussion of county-wide needs for special use facilities.

The service levels established in this study were also derived from a review of the County’s 2017 Parks and Recreation Master Plan, guidance from staff, and (most importantly) public input from a community survey and public meetings.

As we begin the assessment process for the Recreation Master Plan Update, it is important to realize there are two different conditions in Gaston County. There are eight cities/towns in Gaston County that provide park and recreation services to their citizens. These municipalities (Gastonia, Belmont, Mount Holly, Cramerton, Bessemer City, Stanley, Dallas, and Lowell) provide full time staff to program and maintain parks and recreation facilities. Generally, citizens living in incorporated communities of the county have reasonably good access to parks and recreation facilities.

On the other side of the coin, the small towns and unincorporated areas of Gaston County have more limited access to parks and facilities. The county's smaller towns (Ranlo, High Shoals, and Cherryville) have developed small, local parks, but for the most part is underserved with traditional park and recreation facilities. Therefore, these smaller municipalities rely more heavily on County facilities.

Gaston County strives to meet the park and recreation needs of residents by providing District and Community Parks that offer both active and passive recreation, providing facilities for seniors at its senior center, and working with Gaston County Schools in joint use efforts at several park school facilities.

The LOS for development established for Gaston County is consistent with other counties in North Carolina. In many cases, the development standards used in this plan are lower/less than the standards used in the 2007 Parks and Recreation Master Plan and the 2017 Recreation Master Plan. The needs that are identified in this plan update are based on a conservative approach. Even taking this conservative approach, the recommendations in this document should lead the County to develop parks and facilities comparable to most other counties of similar size.

## 5.1 Previous Planning Studies

There have been community/county-wide plans developed in the past that are directly related to developing a Parks and Recreation Master Plan for the County's Parks and Recreation Department. Below is a brief listing/summary of plans that were considered in the development of the recommendations found in this plan. A complete summary can be found in the 2017 Recreation Master Plan, the following relates to items specifically addressed in this updated 2024 report.

### *Carolina Thread Trail Master Plan for Gaston County Communities*

In January of 2009, the Carolina Thread Trail (CTT) completed a master plan for development of the CTT through Gaston County. Overall, there was very strong support for the development of the CTT throughout the county and the development of additional trails throughout the community to connect to this regional trail.

The CTT Master Plan recommends the development of over 40 miles of trails to be constructed throughout the county. The following trail segments were identified:

#### **Priority Segments (26 miles)**

- South Fork River Trail from Spencer Mountain south to I-85
- Cramerton to Downtown Belmont along Highway 7
- South Fork River Trail from I-85 to Cramerton
- Crowders Mountain to Gastonia
- Highland Rail Trail
- Highway 27 south to I-85 in Mount Holly

#### **Second Priority Segments (16 miles)**

- Rankin Lake Park to Spencer Mountain (near Long Creek)

- Mount Holly at Highway 27 along Catawba River to State Educational Forest
- US 29. 74 north to Bessemer City
- Belmont to Belmont Abby College to connect to Mount Holly Greenway

While it has been almost 15 years since the CTT Master Plan was completed, the document still provides very valuable information about trail development and should be used as a guide as the County develops its greenway master plan and works with local agencies in the development of a county wide trail system.

Since 2009, the Carolina Thread Trail, in conjunction with Gaston County and its municipalities, has assisted with trail development in Belmont, Cramerton, Gastonia, Mount Holly and McAdenville as well as at Crowders Mountain and around Daniel Stowe Botanical Garden. There has also been a blueway designated on the South Fork River.

Over the past year, trail planning for the Matthews-Belk South Fork River Corridor proposes a 25-mile trail from Spencer Mountain to Daniel Stowe Botanical Garden that will connect Lowell, McAdenville, Cramerton and Belmont.

A recently acquired trail easement agreement will bring public trails to the top of Spencer Mountain. These trails will be part of the Carolina Thread Trail network. The envisioned trails will span approximately three miles. A simple loop trail around the base of the mountain will provide access for a wide variety of skills and abilities. A more challenging switchback trail leading to the summit will offer breathtaking views of the surrounding region from an observation deck.

See Appendix C for a plan of the proposed segments. See Section 5.5 Greenways for a full review of Greenways and Trails in Gaston County.

### *Gaston County 2035 Comprehensive Land Use Plan*

In 2016, the County developed the 2035 Comprehensive Land Use Plan to create a 20-year vision for county land use. Several of the recommendations in the plan are directly related to parks, greenways, and natural resources. The plan identified 8 goals for future development. Goal 7 in the plan focused most directly on parks, but several other Goals included strategies that are related to parks and recreation. The following goals include recommendations relative to this Recreation Master Plan Update.

#### **Goal 7. Emphasize the importance of our natural resources through highlighting natural environments and encouraging the use of environmental recreation.**

Recognizing the County has an abundance of natural resources, the 2035 Plan recommends the county's natural resources be used to attract tourists and potential residents to the area. Specific objectives and strategies to achieve this goal include:

- Emphasizing existing recreation amenities and encouraging new recreational amenities. This initiative recommended the following:
- Create greenway connections between recreational facilities to allow non-motorized and active transportation between Gaston County communities.

- Promote Park and Recreation facilities to improve health, enhance the county's image, and improve the quality of life for current and potential residents.
- Promote Gaston County's eco-resources on the County website and social media.
- Conserve the natural environment to maintain Gaston's eco-tourism assets.
- Identify areas to be maintained as natural environment to enhance existing facilities.
- Identify areas of potential new eco-tourism sites and recreational facilities.
- Create a greenway/blueway buffer to support the existing trail network in Gaston County and create opportunities for trail side parks.

Several action items implemented since the Recreational Plan in 2017 including the trail development and pump track addition at George Poston Park support and align with the Comprehensive Master Planning for Gaston County.

While land has still not been identified in the northeastern part of the county, an opportunity arose to acquire 550-acres of land in the southeastern portion along the Catawba River. This development will be phased to offer additional passive recreation opportunities, especially for trails and picnicking. Likewise, the County is taking over the management and operations of the Southpoint Access Recreation Area through a lease agreement with Duke Energy. This agreement will allow the County to offer water-based recreation including a public beach, fishing piers, picnic facilities, boat launches and a future canoe/kayak launch.



In addition to Goal 7, which was very focused on Parks and Recreation Resources, the 2035 Plan contained several goals that touched on parks, recreation facilities and greenways. Other relevant goals included:



**Goal 2: Improve the transportation system to include multi-modal regional considerations of highways, bicycle and pedestrian connections, mass transit and connectivity between communities within Gaston County and the larger Charlotte metropolitan area.**

Within this goal the following recommendations are related to parks, recreation, and greenways:

- Improve and expand infrastructure for non-motorized transportation alternatives.
- Connect trails and greenways to residential areas to link neighborhoods to services.

**Goal 4: Enhance quality of life to absorb growth while focusing on commercial and community resources, walkability, and agricultural preservation.**

Under this Goal, recommendations include setting aside quality commercial areas along corridors for development to reduce pressure on sensitive natural resource areas and connecting new developments and redevelopments with greenways where opportunities exist.

**Goal 6: Improve the image of Gaston County both to current and potential residents; focusing on retaining and increasing the population of young professionals.**

Under this Goal, under the recommendation to make an investment into Gaston County's image, the plan recommends support of natural resource initiatives that seek to invest in Gaston County's unique assets.

In summary, parks, greenways, and natural resources are identified as important County assets and have great potential to improve the quality of life for existing residents and to attract new people and business to the county. Likewise, there was very strong support in the plan for expanding parks and greenways that will create ecotourism opportunities.

*2017 Gaston County Parks and Recreation Master Plan*

In 2017, the County completed a Parks and Recreation Master Plan to provide a 10-year vision for the Parks and Recreation Department. In the 6 years since this plan was developed, there have been many changes in the county. The population has grown, county demographics have changed, there are new trends in park development, and many improvements have been made to county parks over the past 6 years. With all of that said, an important starting point for this plan update is a review of the 2017 Plan. It is important to understand the vision that was established in 2017 to determine the vision for the next 10 years.

The planning process for the 2017 plan was very similar to the current process. The plan was developed with considerable public engagement. Public workshops and a county wide survey were conducted to gather input from county residents.

The plan included the following development initiatives:

- Renovations to several existing parks
- ADA improvements to existing parks
- Acquisition of land for a new District Park in the northeastern section of the county
- Construction of 3-5 miles of new greenways
- Development of additional spraygrounds

Order of magnitude cost were provided for each of the recommendations. The total estimated capital cost for all recommended improvements over a 10-year period (in 2017) was \$19,467,500.

### *Gaston County 2017 ADA Transition Plan*

The County developed an ADA Transition Plan in 2017 for each of its facilities/properties. The findings from these studies identified ADA access issues at existing parks and provided facility improvements that will eliminate ADA barriers.

Since these plans were developed, the recommendations have been completed within each of the parks and facilities except for Dallas Park where the improvements are underway with other renovations/expansions.

The county-wide ADA Transition Plan should continue to be used to guide future park improvements.

### *One Gaston 2040 Plan*

In 2023, the Gaston Vision 2040 team prepared *One Gaston 2040: A Place Where Everyone Thrives*, a vision of the County's future, a framework for starting the "journey". The Vision Statement – One Gaston: A place where everyone thrives speaks to the wellbeing of county residents while providing access to all so that everyone can enjoy healthy lives. Parks and recreation play a vital role in One Gaston 2040.

The plan's objectives were defined as:

- One Gaston Cares
- One Gaston Connects
- One Gaston Grows
- One Gaston Work
- One Gaston Shines

Under Gaston Connects Strategy 1.3: Enhance access to safe walking and biking areas, including sidewalks and bike lanes.

"The regional transportation planning agency can ensure that sidewalks, bike lanes, and paths are included in their plan and prioritized for funding. Going one step further, some communities develop a stand-alone Active Transportation Plan to create a connected, accessible system of bicycle, pedestrian, and vehicle infrastructure across Gaston County cities, towns, and unincorporated areas."

Under Gaston Grows Strategy 3.2: Preserve and conserve natural resources and environments.

"There may be opportunities to connect organizations dedicated to preserving natural areas (e.g., the Catawba Lands Conservancy) with landowners interested in private strategies to preserve natural assets. There may also be opportunities for governments to create mitigation programs that substitute land preservation for certain development fees or penalties."

The first step in developing a County-wide Park Master Plan is to establish a Level of Service (LOS) analysis for both park land and recreation facilities. Typically, this process begins with a review of previously used LOS and the LOS other counties are using as they provide park and recreation facilities (benchmarking). We have included a review of other county standards as part of this planning process.

The same process is used to determine recreational facility needs. If the same county determines that softball fields should be available to its residents at a LOS of 1 field for every 10,000 people, there is a demand for 10 softball fields in the county (100,000 population ÷ 10,000 LOS = 10 fields). If the county has 7 existing softball fields serving the recreational needs of county residents, there is a need for 3 additional softball fields [demand (10 fields) – supply (7 fields) = need (3 fields)].

It has been determined that the LOS established in the 2017 plan for both the park acreage and recreational facility needs will remain in effect for this plan update.



park types are fluid and often reflect the specific needs/use of the county and the particular park. Park classification may be based on size, facilities offered, community demand, or lack of other viable options in the service area.

An example of a park's role varying from the park classification guidelines is Pearl Henderson Park. At 5 acres, this park is much smaller than the typical Community Park, but because of its use, the area it serves, and the role it plays in the Department's system, it is functioning as a Community Park and not a Neighborhood Park. Likewise, the acreage listed in the Classifications for Parks, Open Space and Greenways (Appendix B) provide a general range for desired size of facilities. The recommended acreage for each of the parks is not intended as a hard and fast rule of size. The acreages included in the guidelines are not sequential. A 50-acre park could serve as a Community Park or a District Park, depending on the facilities offered, the programming provided and the availability of other parks in the system.

The following is a county-wide assessment of the park needs for the next ten years, including the changes since the 2017 Recreational Master Plan.

### *Mini Parks*

Mini Parks are the smallest park type and typically include a playground, shelter and possibly a play court. There are several parks that fit into the Mini Park classification in the county. They are operated and maintained by municipal agencies.

A standard of 0.10 acres for every 1,000 people in the service population has been established for Mini Parks. This LOS of development is less than the standard used by many North Carolina communities. It reflects a trend in park development away from Mini Parks because their small size limits their recreational use and makes them expensive to maintain and operate. Based on this service level, there is a need for additional Mini Parks in certain areas of the county. In the future municipal agencies may decide to build additional Mini Parks.

As a county agency, Gaston County should not focus its efforts on the development of these smaller parks but should let municipal agencies and developers meet this park need. This need has remained the same since the 2017 Recreational Master Plan.

### *Neighborhood Parks*

Like Mini Parks, Neighborhood Parks are typically developed by municipal agencies. Most municipal departments in the county offer several Neighborhood Parks to their citizens. Gaston County currently offers one Neighborhood Park – Pearl Henderson Park.

The service level set for Neighborhood Parks established by this Master Plan is 1 acre per 1,000 people. Utilizing this level of development, at the time of the 2017 Recreational Master Plan, there was a need for 150 acres of additional Neighborhood Park land throughout the county. In 2017, it was anticipated that by 2026 this need will have reached 168 acres or approximately 17-19 Neighborhood Parks.

The responsibility of developing these future parks should be on municipal agencies. The County may consider working with local agencies in some form of assistance, but development of Neighborhood Parks should not be a priority for the County. This continues to be applicable for future park development by the county.



### *Community Parks*

As with Mini and Neighborhood Parks, municipal agencies are the primary provider of Community Parks in Gaston County. Municipal agencies provide almost 30 Community Parks on almost 800 acres of park land. The County offers six (6) Community Parks on 223 acres of park land.

Based on a park land/population ratio of 4.0 acres per 1,000 population (the standard used in the 2007 Parks and Recreation Master Plan), the need for Community Parks has been met, both in the 2017 Plan and the Update in 2024. The development of future Community Parks should not be a priority for the County, although in the future it is possible that some of the municipalities in the County could develop additional Community Parks. For example, the City of Gastonia is currently planning the conversion of the 150-AC Linwood Springs Golf Course into a community park in the western part of the county.

### *District Parks*

District Parks are large parks (usually greater than 100 acres) that provide both active and passive recreation. Typically, county agencies are the primary source for funding and operating these large parks.

There are 3 existing District Parks in the county. Gaston County provides 2 of these parks (Dallas Park and George Poston Park). The City of Gastonia provides a 3rd District Park at Rankin Lake. Together, these parks provide 619 acres of District Park land. George Poston Park, due to acreage, can also serve as a Regional Park.

Utilizing a standard of 3.5 acres per 1,000 (less than the standard used in the 2007 Parks and Recreation Master Plan) for District Park development, in 2017 there was a need for over 140 additional acres of District Park, or approximately one additional District Park to serve the citizens of Gaston County. The 2017 Plan also stated that by 2026, with the anticipated increase in county population, the need for this park will be critical, and it should be located in the northeastern area of the county. This need may now be met as the County has acquired the Catawba Cove property to serve as a 550-acre District Park for the County. Planning and development for this recreational asset is ongoing.

### *Regional Parks*

Several excellent State Parks (Crowders Mountain, Lake Norman, and Kings Mountain) are within easy driving distance of Gaston County. These large Regional Parks met the passive recreation needs of county citizens in 2017 and additionally in 2024. Development of a Regional Park should not be a priority for the County moving forward with the current plan.

## **5.4 Future Land/Open Space Needs**

As a rapidly urbanizing county, Gaston County should always be open to opportunities for preserving land for open space and recreation. As noted in the 2017 Gaston County Parks and Recreation Master Plan there is a county-wide need for additional park land. As the county's population grows, finding undeveloped property for parks will become more difficult. Since the 2017 plan was implemented Gaston County has been successful in acquiring property with the 550-AC Catawba Cove property and

continues to look for opportunities to expand their parks system through partnerships such as the lease agreement with Duke Energy for the Southpoint Access Recreation Area.

## 5.5 Greenways

The most popular outdoor recreation activity in the nation remains walking. This popularity was reflected in the survey that was conducted as part of this planning study and in comments made during the public workshops.

The importance of providing trails and greenways has heightened over the past decade with the increase in obesity. Walking has become an important activity in the mission to improve community health.

Greenways are typically off-road trails that meander through neighborhoods and natural areas providing transportation corridors and recreational opportunities for walkers, joggers, roller bladers, and cyclists. The trail surface can either be natural or paved. Paved trails are normally eight to ten feet in width. Natural surface trail widths can vary based on conditions.

In addition to providing environmental protection and recreation opportunities, Greenways can produce economic development as has been experienced in many communities such as Cramerton and McAdenville.

Greenways also offer a valuable alternative to automotive transportation. A greenway often provides a linkage between communities, schools, churches, businesses, and parks. Both trails for recreation and paths for transportation (i.e., paths that connect parks, neighborhoods, schools, and commercial areas) were highlighted as important to the residents.

### *Existing Trail Network*

The Carolina Thread Trail (CTT), the regional network of greenways, trails, and blueways that are continually being developed to connect 15 counties, 2 states, and 2.9 million people, runs through Gaston County. The Gaston County CTT Master Plan was adopted in 2009 and has been an important planning tool for both the County and the municipal departments. The proposed corridors and routes include approximately 100 miles of trails in the county. Currently there are just under 28 miles of CTT designated greenways/trails on the ground in Gaston County.

The continued development of the CTT should be a collaborative priority and Gaston County should work in close alignment with CTT and the municipalities to facilitate development. The trail segments identified in the previous master plan report as the highest priority and their current status, include:

- Connecting Dallas Park with the Gaston Community College campus, Rankin Lake, and downtown Gastonia (Various segments have been designed, are in permitting, and/or under construction.)
- Development of trails along the South Fork River connecting Cramerton, McAdenville, Lowell, and Belmont to George Poston Park. (This corridor has been planned with some segments constructed and others in land acquisition.)
- Trail connecting George Poston Park to Spencer Mountain (The corridor has been planned with land acquisition underway.)

This master plan update continues to support the above projects as priority greenway developments. Additional priorities to include:

- Development of a trail corridor from Spencer Mountain South to Catawba Cove to Daniel Stowe Botanical Garden and Duke Kimbrell Trail.
- Continuing Avon and Catawba Creeks Greenway and Linwood Springs to Crowders Mountain State Park (Gastonia).
- Support the development and operations of trail facilities in Poston Park and on Spencer Mountain as a part of the Carolina Thread Trail.
- Support the development and operations of the trails within the South Fork Corridor traveling north from Spencer Mountain to the Gaston-Lincoln County boundary.

Spencer Mountain is the third highest peak in the Charlotte region at 1,240 ft. The Catawba Lands Conservancy has obtained a 20-year trail easement with 5-year renewal periods from the landowner, WBTV, to allow public access via trails to the top of the mountain. The planned trails on Spencer Mountain include a 1-mile multiuse base loop trail, 1-mile adaptive trail for hikers and people mobility limitations to the top of the mountain, and access for cyclists on the gravel Tower Access Road. Several overlooks are planned for the mountain including an approximately 10,000 sq. ft. pocket park at the summit. Gaston County has agreed to take on maintenance and operation of the trail facilities post construction.

### *Trail & Blueway Mileage*

Pharr Yarns Family Trail	2.4 miles
McAdenville Greenway Park	0.8 miles
River Link Greenway	0.7 miles
Goat Island Greenway	0.7 miles
Rocky Branch Trail – Stuart Cramer High School	0.7 miles
Rocky Branch Trail	4.0 miles
Avon and Catawba Creeks Greenway	2.7 miles
Highland Rail – Downtown Sidewalk Connection	3.0 miles
Highland Rail Trail	1.9 miles
A&E Riverfront Trail	1.2 miles
Mount Holly Linear Park Trail	0.3 miles
Dutchman’s Creek Greenway	0.6 miles
Bessemer City Park Trail	1.28 miles
Backside Trail	0.5 miles

Crowders Mountain Trail	2.5 miles
Duke Kimbrell Trail	2.9 miles
Mountain Island Park Trail	<u>1.5 miles</u>
	27.68 miles
South Fork Catawba River Blueway:	
Spencer Mountain to Cramerton Section	8.4 miles
Catawba River Blueway – Lake Wylie Section	

FIGURE 7: CAROLINA THREAD TRAIL NETWORK



**Water Access and Blueways** – A blueway is a water-based trail for paddle-based navigation. Blueways often attract small-scale commercial uses at trailheads (e.g., Kayak rentals). Gaston County is blessed with an abundance of water resources. The South Fork River, the Catawba River, Mountain Island Lake, Rankin Lake, and miles of creeks and streams provide a wide range of water resources. The desire for water access was heard throughout the public participation process.

The value of these water resources has become more evident over the past few years. The County, through its Gaston Outside promotions, has begun to market these resources, along with trails and parks, as a travel and tourism attraction.

The value of these water resources has been recognized by many citizens and a number of organizations are at work to preserve these valuable resources and enhance their appearance and use. Currently, there are 20+ miles of CTT dedicated Blueway along the South Fork and Catawba rivers.





### *Future System Development*

For planning of future greenways, trails, and blueway systems, the County should take into consideration the location of its population and recreation opportunities, in addition to linking these areas with popular services and community amenities. Further collaboration with peer governments and the private sector can aid in the expansion of the system to serve areas across the County.

Blueways were listed in the community survey and received a positive response. New property and easements acquired should take advantage of natural resources such as waterways to provide multi-modal trail access.

## **6 RECOMMENDATIONS**

Many county agencies in North Carolina's urban areas focus on providing parks, senior centers and recreation facilities/services to county residents that live in unincorporated areas or small towns (without parks and recreation departments). Gaston County's primary mission falls within that parameter.

There are eight municipalities in Gaston County that offer their citizens parks and recreation facilities and programs through departmental services. These eight municipal departments are Gastonia, Mount Holly, Belmont, Cramerton, Bessemer City, Stanley, Dallas, and Lowell. These eight departments serve more than half of the entire county population and provide a wide variety of facilities and programs. Gaston County's Parks and Recreation Department focuses its efforts on providing parks and recreation facilities to the 80,000 citizens living in the rural areas of the county that are not served by a parks and recreation department but know that their facilities serve all of the Gaston County residents as well. In addition to serving the unincorporated areas and smaller towns, the Parks and Recreation Department also focuses on working with the municipal agencies throughout the county where opportunities exist.

The needs identified in Section 5: Assessments were established within this organizational framework between county and municipal departments. Identification of these recreational needs/opportunities comes at a time when Gaston County (like many counties in North Carolina) are adjusting to changes because of the recent pandemic. With emphasis put on health and outdoor recreation, County staff and elected officials must carefully plan for park and recreation needs.

## 6.1 Partnerships

### *State of North Carolina*

The State of North Carolina, through its State Parks, Division of Historical Sites and Properties and its Wildlife Division offer people of Gaston County a variety of parks and recreational experiences.

There are several outstanding State Parks within easy driving distance of county residents. Crowders Mountain State Park is in southwestern Gaston County south of Gastonia. This very popular park provides over 3,500 acres of open space with a wide variety of hiking and camping opportunities. Views from the mountain provide a 25-mile panorama of the surrounding area. Likewise, Lake Norman State Park provides a wide variety of water-based recreation, as well as trails, camping, and open space.

Kings Mountain State Park in Blacksburg, South Carolina also provides a wide variety of water-based recreation, as well as trails, picnicking, camping, and open space.

While not located in Gaston County, these wonderful regional facilities are within easy driving distance of all county residents.

In addition to State Parks, the North Carolina Forest Service offers a wonderful environmental education opportunity at Mountain Island Educational State Forest in Stanley. This forest preserve provides both educational opportunities and undeveloped open space for hiking and passive recreation.

It is anticipated that the State of North Carolina will continue to maintain and operate these outstanding facilities. The County, along with other nearby government agencies, should express their desire to see these resources used to their utmost potential. This may include the expansion of facilities and recreational opportunities. The State should continue to offer a variety of recreational facilities and programs on a regional basis. In addition, the State should be the provider of regional State Parks that include opportunities for camping, fishing, biking, and special facilities of regional and statewide interest.

### *Gaston County Schools*

Gaston County should not approach the task of providing parks, recreational opportunities, and senior centers alone. There are several public and private agencies and organizations throughout the county that can share in that role.

School facilities are often used to meet community recreational needs during non-school hours. Gaston County Schools have historically been an important resource for county recreation programs. The indoor and outdoor facilities of the school system play an instrumental role in meeting recreational needs of all county residents. The 2017 plan addressed continued exploration and development of joint use opportunities with the school system is critical to the success of this parks and recreation master plan.

Current school recreation facilities used by Gaston County are:

- Hershall H. Beam Elementary

- W.A Bess Elementary
- Catawba Heights Elementary
- Chapel Grove Elementary
- Cramerton Middle School
- East Gaston High School
- Forestview High School
- New Hope Elementary
- Pinewood Elementary
- Robinson Elementary

Historically, the Gaston County School Board has been a significant partner with the County in providing recreational opportunities to county residents. As noted in Section One: Inventory, the County relies heavily on school facilities for athletic fields and gymnasium space. Currently, the County is programming facilities at ten schools for youth athletic programs. In return, the County provides maintenance on school park facilities.

Going forward, the County and the School Board should look for additional opportunities to work together. An important area of collaboration would be the joint planning of future schools. By working together in the early stages of planning, opportunities for joint development of both indoor and outdoor recreation facilities could be identified.

As noted in the Needs Assessment, there is considerable demand for gymnasium space for public recreational use. Partnering with the school system as new schools are constructed is the most economical means of developing indoor recreational space.

#### *Gaston County Municipalities*

The municipalities of Gastonia, Mount Holly, Belmont, Cramerton, Bessemer City, Stanley, Dallas, and Lowell are primary providers of parks and recreation facilities in the county. In addition, several of the county's smaller communities (Cherryville, Ranlo, and High Shoals) provide small parks and civic spaces. The development of county-wide parks and recreation facilities should be coordinated with the facilities and services offered by all these municipalities. There is great value in the collaboration of all park and recreation agencies. Financial and human resources are too valuable to duplicate. Where possible, the municipal agencies should work with the County for the betterment of parks and recreation programming.

#### *CaroMont Health*

Another major player with the mission of improving community health and the quality of life is CaroMont Health. The County should look for opportunities to partner with the hospital and other health organizations in the promotion of healthy lifestyles.

Citizens of Gaston County have access to outstanding medical facilities offered by CaroMont Health. Their facilities provide residents of Gaston County, and the surrounding area, with excellent healthcare. Recent studies on obesity and healthy lifestyles have made it apparent that a community's health is linked to regular physical activity. Many of these activities are currently offered by the Parks and Recreation Departments in the County.

The County's Parks and Recreation Department, working in conjunction with CaroMont Health, should look for programs and facilities that can improve community health.

#### *Private Sector*

Finally, the private sector plays an important role in providing recreational opportunities in the county. Several fitness clubs, neighborhood swim clubs, churches, and other private or quasi-private organizations provide valuable recreation opportunities to the citizens of Gaston County. The facilities and programs of these private sector organizations should be considered as the County plans development of future facilities. Likewise, developers should seek opportunities to add parks, trails, and greenspace in residential, office, and commercial developments.

It is essential to clearly understand how the County will interface with these other recreational and health providers. This cooperative effort will eliminate duplication of facilities and services. The proposals in this Master Plan are based on what each recreational provider is anticipated to offer through the ten-year planning period (2024-2033).

## **6.2 Renovation and Expansion of Existing Parks**

While the focus of the previous recommendations has been on the acquisition and development of new parks, and the progress made in this area since 2017, there is also a continued need to maintain, improve, and expand facilities at many of the County's existing parks. As part of the ongoing planning and budgeting process, the Parks and Recreation Department annually establishes a list of capital improvement projects. This list of capital improvements needs is then used by the Department and elected officials to establish yearly capital improvement budgets.

As noted in Section 5, the County previously developed an ADA Transition Plan for its facilities. Through that study, each of the Department's parks has been assessed with regard to ADA accessibility and recommendations have been made with regard to needed renovations.

As a public entity, it is very important for the County to make all its parks and recreation facilities accessible. Most of the ADA Transition Plan has been implemented with improvements at Dallas Park still underway. Any future recreation development as part of the 2024 Recreational Master Plan update should also continue to reference the ADA Transition Plan.

## **6.3 Master Plans for Future Improvements**

As noted in previous sections, Master Plans should be developed for several of the County's existing parks and future parks. Parks and facilities that warrant special study include:

- Countywide Greenway Master Plan
- Detailed Facility Assessments for all County Parks
- Detailed Master Plan & Phasing Plan for Catawba Cove

Additional park-specific master plans should be developed as new properties are acquired.



## 6.4 Facility Proposals & Recommendations

The 2017 planning report recommended the County should develop a new District Park, renovate its existing parks, expand trails, and facilitate improvements for the senior center. The following facility needs listed below have been updated to reflect the 2024 Recreation Master Plan Update. It should be noted that the facility needs listed here are county-wide needs. Meeting all these needs will require a coordinated effort by all park and recreation providers.

### *Adult Baseball*

Continuing the same downward trend noted in 2017, the popularity of adult baseball has waned, both locally and across the nation. Based on this trend, a LOS of one field per 20,000 people for the development of adult baseball fields is recommended. Utilizing this standard of field development, there is not a current pressing need for an additional adult baseball field. Additional fields could be constructed in the future if demand arises.

### *Youth Baseball*

Youth baseball remains a very popular sport in North Carolina and that popularity is evident in Gaston County. The County, utilizing school fields, has access to many youth fields. Utilizing a LOS of one field for every 6,000 people (LOS similar to other NC counties), there was a need in 2017 for several additional fields. As the county's population grows, the need for fields will grow as well, which is reflected in the 2024 assessment, where five fields are still needed. Some of these needed fields could be constructed at the proposed District Park and some of these fields will likely be constructed as municipal agencies build new parks in the future.

In addition to the local demand for youth baseball fields, the development of facilities for youth baseball could also provide valuable economic benefit to the county. Economic impact studies indicate a tournament level baseball facility in Gaston County could successfully create a venue for youth tournaments that would bring tens of thousands of tourists to the county, creating economic impact through restaurants, hotels and shopping. Improvements to the ball fields at Dallas Park, as outlined in the Park's Master Plan, could provide a tournament level facility.

### *Softball*

Men's adult softball has traditionally been a popular sport in North Carolina. NRPA and NCDENR standards (one field per 5,000 people) reflect that popularity. This plan recommends a LOS development of one field per 6,000 people (similar to other North Carolina counties). Based on this standard, the County had a need for a few additional softball fields in 2017. This need has continued. These types of fields could be located in the proposed District Park or through expansion of parks in municipalities.

It should also be noted that changes in demand have now placed additional emphasis on women's and youth softball. In the future, softball fields should be designed to accommodate this new area of play, or some of the existing fields should be retrofitted to allow for women and youth play.

### *Football*

Football's popularity as a community-based youth sport has been reduced by the emergence of soccer and (most recently) lacrosse. However, based on input received during the public workshop, there appears to be a need for "game day" fields and opportunities to work with youth football associations to improve underutilized fields.

### *Soccer*

Soccer continues to be one of the fastest growing sports in America. Some local demand for the sport was expressed in the survey. This Master Plan reflects this demand by establishing a LOS of one field for every 3,500 people within the service population. Utilizing this standard for development, the County needs fifteen additional soccer fields, by 2030 the demand will grow to twenty.

As with ball fields, some of these new soccer fields will be located at the new District Park, some may be added to existing county parks, and some will be added at municipal parks.

The County should consider lighting athletic fields, which effectively doubles their use. Likewise, the development of synthetic turf fields could greatly increase playing time on existing fields and reduce the number of fields needed.

A final note on soccer, the demand for multi-purpose fields helps address the continued interest in lacrosse, field hockey and rugby. These newer sports should be taken into consideration since play for these sports can be programmed on similar fields. One method to accommodate the variety of field games (soccer, lacrosse, rugby, football) is to develop larger multi-use fields that can be used for a variety of field games.

### *Multipurpose (Rectangle) Fields*

Many park and recreation agencies continue to move towards the development of multipurpose fields to provide play space for football, soccer, lacrosse, and rugby. The development of these multipurpose fields, sometimes simply called rectangle fields, provides the most program flexibility. Based on input from staff, stakeholders, and the public, there is a need for fifteen additional rectangle/multipurpose fields in the county. By 2030, this need will grow to 20 rectangle fields.

### *Basketball (Outdoor)*

Basketball remains an extremely popular sport in the United States. Played by a variety of ages, this sport can be played either indoors or out. Currently, there are twenty-four public outdoor basketball courts located throughout the county. Based on a LOS of one outdoor basketball court per 7,000 people, the County currently has a need for seven new outdoor courts, by 2030 the need will increase to ten courts.

In addition to outdoor courts, there is a need for indoor basketball, as well. See the section on Community Centers and Gymnasiums for the community's need for indoor courts.

### *Tennis*

Based on input received in the survey and the public workshops, tennis remains popular sport in Gaston County. Currently there are fifty-one public courts in the county. A number of these courts are located at schools.

Utilizing a relatively conservative LOS of facility development (one court per 3,500 people) there is a current need for eleven additional courts throughout the county. These courts could be added to the proposed District Park or by municipal agencies as new parks are developed.

The demand for tennis courts is also impacted by the recent emergence of pickleball. As noted under the section on Trends in Parks and Recreation Facilities, pickleball is one of the region's fastest growing recreation activities. Pickleball can be played on a realigned tennis court; this increases the demand for tennis courts.

### *Volleyball*

There are only six outdoor volleyball courts in parks throughout the county. There is a potential need for additional courts. Volleyball courts are relatively small and can easily be added to existing parks.

### *Horseshoes*

There are currently thirty-two horseshoe courts throughout the county. This activity provides a recreational outlet and opportunities for social interaction, particularly for older citizens.

The County may consider building horseshoe courts in parks or in conjunction with its senior center if there is a demand for this activity in the future. Like volleyball courts, horseshoe courts are relatively small and can easily be added to existing parks or senior centers.

### *Shuffleboard*

There is only one public shuffleboard court in Gaston County. This activity provides a recreation outlet for social interaction, particularly for older citizens. The County may consider building shuffleboard courts if there is additional demand for this activity in the future. Like horseshoe pits, shuffleboard courts are relatively small and can easily be added to existing parks or senior centers.

### *Picnic Shelters*

Picnicking was one of the most popular recreational activities listed by respondents in the County's survey. There are currently 60+ picnic shelters located throughout the county. Based on a LOS of one shelter per 3,000 people, there is a need for twelve additional shelters. By 2030, there will be a need for eighteen shelters. Picnic shelters can be added to existing parks and should be included in any new parks built throughout the county. Picnic shelters ranked 5<sup>th</sup> in the high priority rating from the survey.



### *Playgrounds*

There are 45+ public playgrounds serving county residents. Many of these playgrounds are located on school property. Playgrounds were listed as a popular recreational facility in the survey and public workshops. Additional playgrounds are needed. As new parks are developed, the County should look for locations for additional playgrounds. Larger parks may warrant more than one playground.

Safety inspections and ADA accessibility audits should be conducted at all existing playgrounds. As new playgrounds are completed and existing playgrounds renovated, wood fiber and sand surfaces should be replaced with poured in place (PIP) safety or turf surfacing. PIP surfaces provide wheelchair accessibility and reduce maintenance and lifecycle costs of the playgrounds.

A popular trend in playground development is natural play areas. These relatively new play areas are designed on the concept of providing opportunities for children to interact with the natural environment when playing. Instead of relying on plastic and steel play structures, these play areas use natural features (creeks, rocks, trees, dirt, etc.) to provide play opportunities. Inspired by the book Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children, this new trend in playground development seeks to re-introduce our youth to the natural environment. The County should consider the development of nature-based playgrounds in one of its parks.

### *Pedestrian Trails*

Walking remains the number one outdoor recreational activity in the United States. Walking or biking a greenway trail system or natural trail use scored high in the public survey ( $\pm 87\%$  indicated they are interested in using nature trails and greenway trail systems). Over 56% stated their need for greenways or trails was not being met. Nature trails and Greenway trail systems scored 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> in the high priority rating from the survey.

With this level of public demand, the development of walking trails and greenways should remain a priority for future park and greenway development. A priority should be placed on trail development in all existing and future parks. A paved walking trail or greenway is an important component of all park types, and should be provided in all Neighborhood, Community and District Parks. In addition to paved trails, many county parks should also include natural trails for passive recreation and access to undeveloped open space within the parks.

Pedestrian trails should be included in all parks as the County improves its park system. In addition to park trails, the County should look for opportunities to work with partner agencies/organizations to explore opportunities for trail development along the South Fork River to provide pedestrian connections between parks, schools, and other public spaces.

### *Biking Trails*

Biking continues to grow as an outdoor recreational activity. The County should continue to expand opportunities for biking through the development of a Greenway trail system, including paths suitable for biking in existing and future parks, and through encouraging NCDOT to develop roads with bike lanes or wider shoulders to accommodate bikers. The County should work with other stakeholders to help promote and facilitate new bikeways throughout the county.

In addition to paved bike trails, the County should look for opportunities with its existing or future parks to develop mountain bike trails. Based on input received at the public workshops and in stakeholder interviews there is demand in the county for this sport. Currently there are mountain bike trails in George Poston Park and Rocky Branch Park (Belmont/Cramerton). Based on the popularity of these facilities, the County should consider development of additional mountain bike trails.





### *Amphitheaters and Outdoor Performing Areas*

There are several existing amphitheaters in Gaston County. There seems to be demand for outdoor special events in the public workshops. Amphitheaters should be considered as potential outdoor amenity areas as future parks are developed.

## **6.5 Senior Center & Services**

The National Council on Aging now classifies older adults or seniors as age 60 and above. There are 10,000 Americans turning age 65 every year. “As the population ages, older Americans will play an increasingly important role in our economy.” – National Council on Aging. According to Gaston County Census Bureau 2020 data numbers, persons 65 years and over account for almost 16.8% of the County population.

Gaston County currently has one senior center located adjacent to the County offices at Dallas Park.

### *Healthy Aging*

By investing in and expanding services for Gaston County’s senior citizens, proactivity and prevention can offset significantly more costly medical treatments and expenses. Chronic health conditions are, unfortunately, often a part of the aging process. Ninety-two percent of people over age 65 live with at least one chronic health condition, such as diabetes, heart disease, arthritis, or cancer. Seventy-seven percent live with two or more such conditions. (Source: National Association of Area Agencies on Aging). Today, senior center professionals and staff are assisting their clients in the management of these conditions, helping seniors remain healthy and active in their communities.

### *Recommendations*

The 2017 report indicated a need for expanded services and senior center locations in Gaston County. The continued growth in the county’s senior population, coupled with nationally recognized aging-focused research and data, facilitated this need.

### *Services*

Seniors can benefit by community-based programs planned to meet their special needs. Diverse groups of active adults require multiple functions and a comprehensive array of services. The NCOA lists the following recommended programs and services:

- Meal and nutrition programs
- Information and assistance
- Health, fitness, and wellness programs
- Transportation services
- Public benefits counseling
- Employment assistance
- Volunteer and civic engagement opportunities
- Social and recreational activities
- Educational and arts programs
- Intergenerational programs

Noticeably, there is a strong alignment between Gaston County’s needs and the Nation’s trends. While the County’s senior services offered through the Parks and Recreation Department cannot address all the programs/needs, it is important for the Department to identify program priorities and focus on those priorities.



### *Existing Facility Improvements*

The existing Dallas Senior Center currently offers a relatively wide range of program spaces. Even with these improvements, overall renovation, and improvements for both general maintenance and to stay current with growing senior needs and demographic demands will be needed in the future. An important aspect of any renovation of the facility will be eliminating the “institutional” feel of the building.

With the most recent expansion of 6,200 square feet, the new space offers:

- Room for Dancing & Large Events
- Wellness Room
- Craft/Multipurpose Room
- Computer Room/Library
- New Programming Opportunities for Wellness & Daily Life Skills

In the immediate future (next 10 years), the highest priority should be additional fitness room expansion and new flooring.

In addition to the need for program expansion listed above, there is a demand for pickleball and volleyball.

### *Funding*

Senior Centers have a unique base of support in each local community. Many are supported by county and municipal governments along with private and non-profit organizations. United Way, foundations, and civic, religious, and social groups, along with fundraisers, bond referendums, and participant donations and fees are all used to build and operate senior centers.

### *Naming*

Nationally, centers are moving away from the term ‘senior’ center; and are instead rebranding to Active Adult or Active Living Centers. This appeals to a more vibrant and exciting place to improve one’s quality of life.

## 6.6 Special Use Facilities

### *Community Centers & Gymnasiums*

Based on input received at the public workshops and from the county-wide survey, many Gaston County residents would like to have better access to indoor recreation facilities. The third highest priority rating from the survey indicated a desire/need for indoor recreation.

The construction and operation of a multi-use recreation center is a significant undertaking, but it is the recommendation of this report that the County explore this option. Many of the stakeholders discussed the importance of providing parks and recreation facilities and programs that will enhance the quality of life of Gaston citizens and attract people and business to the county. The development of better indoor recreation facilities will help give the County the type of parks and recreation system that will reach that goal.

A recreation center also provides space for classes and programs that can promote healthy lifestyles.

The County should explore all options for providing indoor recreation opportunities. The joint use of school facilities may be the best option for providing indoor facilities.

### *Swimming Pools, Therapy Pools & Spraygrounds*

In the past, NRPA and NCRPA provided a standard for pool development of one pool for every 20,000 people. This standard was based on the concept of multi-neighborhood or community pools. Today, with the high cost of operation and construction of swimming pools, very few agencies develop neighborhood/community pools to that old standard. Instead, agencies typically provide more centralized facilities where one pool may serve a greater population.

There are some existing swimming pools in municipal parks: Lineberger Park and Erwin Community Center in Gastonia, C.B.Huss Recreation Center in Cramerton, Bessemer City Park in Bessemer City. While these existing pools are meeting many aquatic needs, there is a need for additional swimming pools in the county.

Many county Departments in North Carolina do not provide pools or aquatic programs, but instead rely on municipal departments to provide these facilities and programs. Based on the cost of building and operating aquatic facilities, it is highly unlikely the County will develop swimming pools in the future.

Spraygrounds continue to grow in popularity across the country. In addition to offering a water-based play experience, the play structures, sprays, etc. afford children of all ages a total play environment and are much more economical to operate than a standard swimming pool. A properly designed, large water park sprayground can serve as a regional draw, provide revenue to the County, and provide a beneficial economic impact to the surrounding areas. The County has recently constructed a sprayground at Dallas Park. Based on the popularity of this relatively new recreation facility, the County should consider additional spraygrounds in other parks, but it is not an immediate need with the new sprayground added at Dallas Park.



## 6.7 Trends in Park & Recreational Facilities

The list of recreational activities developed for this Parks and Recreation Master Plan is based on national and state standards that have been used in park planning for decades. As noted earlier in this section, these standards are used as a point of reference, with the understanding that each agency should develop standards that are unique to their specific needs.

One of the downsides of the national and state guidelines is that they are not updated often and fail to incorporate newer trends and activities. In the past decade, several new activities have been growing in popularity and should be considered in future park development. These activities include:

### *Skateboard Parks and Extreme Sports*

Skateboarding has been popular for several decades. In the past decade, many communities have recognized its popularity and have tried to provide a safe and vandal resistant setting for this creative sport. There are currently four Skateboard Parks in the county. There was little interest in developing additional Skateboard Parks expressed in the survey or the public workshops. Currently, the development of this type of facility does not appear to be a priority.

### *Disc Golf*

Disc golf received significant demand in the survey completed in 2017 (over half of those surveyed expressed interest). Likewise, nationally the popularity of the sport continues to grow. There are currently several disc golf courses in the county, with a new disc golf course added since 2017 to George Poston Park. Disc golf courses are inexpensive and have minimal impact on the land. The County should consider the future development of additional disc golf courses in the future.

### *Off-leash Dog Areas*

Off-leash dog areas are one of the newest trends in park development. The popularity of these facilities (also known as Dog Parks) is a response to the nation's love of pets and the increase in apartment/condominium living. Communities throughout North Carolina are now constructing Dog Parks.

Dog Parks take many forms but are primarily a place within a park where park users can bring their dogs to run, walk, and recreate. They usually include a fenced open area where dogs, accompanied by their owner, are allowed to run free. Often the off-leash dog area is divided into sections for large and small dogs or in runs that can be rented.

The County currently operates Dog Parks at both George Poston Park and Dallas Park. Based on the success of these new facilities, the County may consider development of additional Dog Parks in its parks in the future. Dog parks scored 7<sup>th</sup> in the high priority rating from the survey.





### *Community Gardens*

Community gardens provide a wide variety of community enhancements. They offer health benefits by providing local gardeners with fresh vegetables and increased exercise as they tend the gardens. They also provide environmental benefits by reducing transportation costs for food production and providing more plant cover, which reduces urbanization impacts on climate change. In addition, community gardens provide a venue for social interaction that reduces isolation and supports community involvement.

There are currently two community gardens in public parks throughout Gaston County. Community gardens rounded out the eight facilities listed in the high priority rating from the survey.

With the many benefits provided by community gardens, many parks and recreation agencies are implementing community garden programs. Additional community gardens should be considered in the future.

### *Pickleball*

One of the fastest growing sports in the region is pickleball. Played on a court similar (but smaller) to a tennis court, this sport uses a paddle and plastic ball. The smaller court and plastic ball make the sport attractive to seniors, but youth and teenagers are also attracted to the quickness of the game. With the rapid increase in popularity of this sport, many recreation departments are encountering community demand to build pickleball courts or convert tennis courts to multiple use.



## **7 ACTION PLAN IMPLEMENTATION**

In the previous sections, the County's needs for parks, recreational facilities, and senior centers have been identified. Careful planning and strategic thinking will be required if these needs are to be met.

This section will identify funding sources for implementing some of the recommendations of this plan and identify possible strategies for funding the proposed recommendations.

Instrumental to the implementation of the Master Plan is the identification of adequate funding for facility development and improvements. Finding adequate funding for parks and recreation is often difficult with the many financial demands most counties face. Limited budgets place even greater importance on careful planning to meet projected needs.

While much of the focus of previous sections has been on park and facility improvements, physical improvements are only part of the needs if the County is to offer its citizens parks and recreation services. As County leaders plan for the future, they should also consider a number of operational and management issues that will position them to meet county wide needs. This section reviews some of those issues.

This section will look at a Capital Improvements Plan for addressing the recommendations in this plan and provide a strategy for raising funds to construct the proposed improvements and new facilities.

Implementing the recommendations made in this Master Plan will result in meeting the future needs for parks, recreation services, and senior centers. If the needs identified in this report are to be met, the County must establish adequate budgets for projected staffing, operations, and maintenance costs, and for capital improvements for parks, recreation, and senior centers. This Action Plan is designed to give County staff viable options to help finance the proposals and recommendations of this Master Plan.

## 7.1 Revenue Plan

Upon adoption of the Master Plan, County staff should consider the establishment of a Revenue Plan for the Parks and Recreation Department. A Revenue Plan incorporates all available funding resources, prioritizes them, and puts each option into a funding strategy. In a Revenue Plan, the following funding alternatives are evaluated for their appropriate use in funding capital improvements and programs:

### *KEY FUNDING/REVENUE SOURCES*

There seems to be strong public support for the County to improve parks, expand recreation and senior programs, but innovative measures will be required to meet the needs identified in this plan. The proposed new facilities and expanded operations will require dollars from a variety of sources. The following funding sources are provided to help the County evaluate funding options:

#### *General Tax Revenues (operational & capital)*

General tax revenues traditionally provide the principle source of funds for general operations and maintenance of municipal and county parks and recreation departments. Recreation, as a public service, is scheduled along with health, public safety, schools, etc. in annual budgets established by the governing authority. Assessed valuation of real and personal property provides the framework for this major portion of the tax base. This tax base is then used to fund a majority of county services. Currently, funding for parks and recreation/senior services is a relatively small portion of the County's overall budget. If the County wishes to enhance the quality of life and healthy lifestyle opportunities for its residents, the current level of funding for parks and recreation should be increased.

### *Park Foundation (operational & capital)*

A park foundation can be instrumental in assisting the County in acquiring land, developing facilities, sponsoring programs, and buying equipment for park and recreation needs. Park foundations typically create funding strategies for generating monies to support park projects. These include foundation membership fees, individual gifts, grants from other recognized and national foundations, long term endowments, and land trust for future acquisitions.

Partners for Parks, a Mecklenburg County based foundation, is committed to the development of Regional Parks, including parks in Gaston County. Partners for Parks is a good example of a foundation developed to support a facility or project. The County should explore ways to work with Partners for Parks or a similar organization should be established specifically for Gaston County.

### *General Foundations (operational & capital)*

Another source of revenue is the direct contribution of money from state and national General Foundations. Foundation funds should be sought for both development and construction of facilities as well as providing programs. Funding sources should include general-purpose foundations that have relatively few restrictions, special program foundations for specific activities, and corporate foundations with local connections.

### *Foundations with Emphasis on Conservation, Healthy Lifestyles & Parks*

Gaston County is in a position to receive grant funding from a wide variety of public foundations and trusts. Below is a list of funding sources that are particularly applicable. A number of these fundings/trusts are currently at work in the county:

- The Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust has been instrumental in funding projects in North Carolina. Their focus is to improve the quality of life and health.
- The Trust for Public Land and NC Rails to Trails have been instrumental in providing financial and technical assistance for open space conservation and development of greenways in North Carolina.
- Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) is the nation's largest philanthropic organization devoted specifically to the public's health. RWJF promotes change through partnerships and collaboration, with the goal of building a culture of health for all Americans. RWJF generally supports public agencies, universities, and public charities that are tax-exempt.
- W.K. Kellogg Foundation places optimal development of children at the center of all their grants. They concentrate on early childhood development within the context of families and communities. The W.K. Kellogg Foundation's areas of focus are educated kids, healthy kids, secure families, community and civic engagement, and racial equity.
- KaBOOM! is a national non-profit dedicated to providing play opportunities for America's children. They envision a place to play within walking distance of every child. KaBOOM! works with communities, volunteers, and funding partners to build playgrounds throughout the country.
- BlueCross BlueShield of North Carolina Foundation has invested millions of dollars in communities across the state. They support opportunities that have an impact on the health of our state. Their areas of focus are health of vulnerable populations, healthy active communities, and community impact through non-profit excellence.

- Playworks Grants Database is a good resource for grants. Examples found within this database are:
  - The philanthropic arm of Safeway Groceries which established the Safeway Foundation to support non-profits whose mission is aligned with the company's priority areas; hunger relief, education, health, and human services and assisting people with disabilities. The Safeway Foundation offers grants up to \$25,000.
  - Cigna Health through its Cigna Foundation supports organizations that enhance health in individuals, families, and communities. They offer grants up to \$5,000.
  - Home Depot and Lowe's, through their foundations, offer grants towards improving community health.
  - People For Bikes provides a community grant program that provides grants up to \$10,000 to improve infrastructure and programs that make it easier and safer for people of all ages and abilities to bike.

Another source of local assistance may be large corporations with foundations established to provide grants for public projects. Companies such as Bank of America, REI, and Duke Energy often have available funding through existing grant programs, or they may be interested in creating a program or partnership for specific projects.

The County should actively pursue grants from foundation and trust sources on a regional and national level. Information on trusts and foundations can be found through the Foundation Center, 79 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10003-3076 (<http://foundationcenter.org/>) and the Non-Profit Gateway to Federal Government agencies (<http://www.usa.gov/index.shtml>).

#### *General Obligation Bonds (capital)*

General tax revenue for parks and recreation is usually devoted to current operations and maintenance of existing facilities. General obligation bonds are often used to finance capital improvements in parks. The State of North Carolina gives municipal and county governments the authority to accomplish this borrowing of funds for parks and recreation through the issuance of bonds not to exceed the total cost of improvements (including land acquisition). For purposes of paying the debt service on the sale of these bonds, government bodies are often required to increase property taxes. Total bonding capacities for these government agencies are limited to a maximum percentage of assessed property valuation.

Gaston County has not used this method of financing park improvements in the past. In view of the recommended capital improvements suggested in this plan, borrowing funds to acquire new land and develop facilities may be a consideration. Response from the county-wide survey indicated there may be support for additional spending to develop parks.

An added value of a governing agency's bonding authority and capacity is its ability to use those funds to leverage other funding opportunities. Bonding enables government agencies to utilize funds to match federal grant-in-aid monies or state funds. General obligation bonds are still the greatest source utilized to fund park projects in North Carolina. Through a well thought out and publicly presented bond campaign, voters would be given the opportunity to choose to support park improvements through the selling of bonds.



*Revenue Bonds (capital)*

Revenue bonds are used for financing high use specialty facilities like golf courses, aquatic centers, tennis centers, and complexes for softball and soccer. The users, and other revenue sources, pay for operations and sometimes repay the bonds. This revenue source would only be of use to the County if they choose to change their tax subsidy policy for using this type of funding. The County most likely would not seek out this option.

The legal requirements for utilizing these funding mechanisms are extremely complicated and can require approval from the state legislature. Use of revenue bonds seems to be unlikely at this time.

*Limited Option or Special Use Tax (capital)*

Limited option or special use taxes can be established in various ways. A municipality or county can establish the tax by determining the source, such as property valuation, real estate transfer taxes, or sales tax. This option requires legislative approval. Typically, special use taxes are structured on sales tax or transfer taxes and are earmarked for a specific project. A governing body can approve a tax that is identified or earmarked on property valuation; however, other sources may require state approval. The idea behind a special option or limited option tax is that the tax is identified or limited for a special purpose or projects and the duration can also be limited to accomplishing the projects.

The County currently levies an occupancy tax on hotel rooms to help fund travel and tourism operation and promote local tourism. Many travel and tourism authorities throughout North Carolina utilize this funding source to make improvements to recreation facilities that attract tourists. This funding source could be considered in the development of athletic fields, trails and river access, or equestrian facilities that might enhance tourism.

*Federal and State Assistance (capital)*

Federal and state funding sources are available to assist financing capital improvement recommendations found in this plan. Many of these grant opportunities are administered through the NC Division of Parks & Recreation (DPR).

LWCF - One of the oldest park funding sources has been available from the U.S. Park Service's Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF). Several of the existing parks in Gaston County were funded with monies from this funding source. Unfortunately, funding through this program in North Carolina has been sporadic over the past few years but has been re-energized over the past few years.

PARTF - The North Carolina General Assembly passed a bill in 1994 creating a consistent source of funds for parks and recreation in the state. The Parks and Recreation Trust Fund (PARTF) provides money for capital improvements, repairs, renovations, and land acquisition of state and local parks. Originally, revenues from the state's portion of the real estate deed transfer tax supported the fund. Revenues vary from year to year. The structure of this funding source has recently gone through changes based on legislative action. While the funding structure for this fund has changed, it appears PARTF will continue to fund park and recreation facilities in North Carolina.

Of the funds allocated, 65% go to the state parks system, 30% provide matching grants to local governments, and the remaining 5% go to the Coastal and Estuarine Water Beach Access Program. The maximum matching grant is limited to \$500,000 for a single project. The PARTF system allows an agency to apply for a 50/50 cost-sharing grant to develop or acquire park land and facilities.

PARTF and LWCF funds have been used by the County and several municipalities to build parks. In the future, the County should consider applying for funds through this program on a regular basis.

RTP - The Recreation Trails Program (RTP) provides funding for construction of new trails, maintenance and repair of existing trails, land acquisition, purchase of trail tools and planning, legal, environmental, and permitting costs.

ORLP – The Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership (ORLP) program was established in 2014 and is funded through the Land and Water Conservation Fund. ORLP is a nationally competitive, dollar-for-dollar matching grant program. It was created to aid disadvantaged, urban communities that lack access to close-by outdoor recreation. Funds can be used for the acquisition and/or development of, or substantial renovation of, public parks and other outdoor recreation spaces.

Projects may include any or all manner of outdoor recreation activities such as hiking, camping, unstructured play, picnicking, cycling, field and court sports, fishing, bird watching, swimming pools, paddling, and skating, as well as for outdoor recreation facilities and some supporting facilities and infrastructure like restrooms/bathhouses, or parking areas, when part of an overall recreation project.

New grant opportunities being administered through DPR include:

AP – Accessible Parks (AP) Grant Program provides matching grants for parks and recreation to benefit people living with disabilities in North Carolina. Local governments, including public authorities, are eligible to apply. This program is administered through the Division of Parks and Recreation and the North Carolina Parks and Recreation Trust Fund.

The matching grants can be used for:

- the construction of special facilities, or
- adaptation of existing facilities that meet the unique needs of persons living with disabilities or enable them to participate in recreational and sporting activities, regardless of their abilities.

Applicants can request a maximum of \$500,000 with each application and must match the grant with at least \$1 of local funds for every \$5 in grant funds.

GTPS – Starting in 2024, the Great Trails State Program (GTSP), funded with \$12.5 million each year for two years, will be a competitive grant program for new trail development and extension of existing trails, including paved trails, greenways, and natural surface trails for biking, hiking, walking, equestrian use, and paddling. The fund will be administered by the North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources (NCDNCR).

Eligible applicants will include municipalities or counties, regional councils of government, other public authorities, and nonprofit organizations. Eligible uses for funds will include planning, design, and related environmental assessment or permitting, land and easement acquisition, trail construction, trail structures (such as bridges), trail amenities (such as trailhead parking, signage, etc.), and maintenance, and can be used as matching funds for federal or other non-state grants.

The fund will require a minimum of a 25% flexible match, including cash, in-kind services, or donation of assets. Grants awarded will be limited to \$500,000 per project.

Additionally, the State can fund projects such as bikeways and pedestrian walks through the federally funded SAFTEA [formerly known as the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA)]. The North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT) administers the funds, and the local government agency can use these funds for developing portions of any proposed Greenway system. Local communities can also apply for assistance with pedestrian, bikeway, and greenway projects by applying for “NCDOT Enhancement Funds.”

Another source of state administered funding is through the North Carolina Land and Water Fund (NCLWF) (formerly known as the Clean Water Management Trust Fund (CWMTF)). These funds are set aside for the acquisition of riparian properties, financing of innovative wastewater management initiatives, stormwater mitigation and stream bank restoration projects, support for greenways, and some planning programs. The acquired or purchased property can be used for recreation while protecting valuable water resources from the effects of urban encroachment. Money from this grant is particularly applicable to the preservation of open space, greenway development, and water access.

An excellent source to find government grants is on the website [www.grants.gov](http://www.grants.gov). This website clearing house provides information for all federal grants. Grant opportunities exist in the following categories:

- Community Development
- Environment
- Health
- Natural Resources
- Transportation

Any of these categories could have grants that could be used to develop programs and facilities for parks.

#### *User Fees (operational)*

User fees are often charged by departments to offset operational cost, and (occasionally) provide funding for the construction of facilities. Every agency must establish its philosophy regarding cost recovery through the use of fees. The County has historically charged fees for some facilities and programs such as athletic tournaments and field rentals, court rentals, equestrian facilities, picnic shelters, amphitheater, cabins, special events and senior programming, but these fees have typically not been set to cover the total operational cost of the program and have never been used to finance construction of facilities.

Ultimately, the County may consider a change in user fees that will help offset more of the cost of some activities. Based on elected officials’ direction, the revenue generated by increased fees could then be used to offset impacts on the general fund and possibly be used for capital improvement funding to help make park improvements.

Many of the proposed facilities in this Master Plan are outdoors (playgrounds, open space, athletic facilities, etc.) and offer only limited opportunity for cost recovery. There may be some areas where greater cost recovery could be achieved. Examples may include use fees for boat launches, swim beaches, etc. or for requiring permits for dog parks, disc golf, etc.

### *Revenue Opportunities*

User fees are not the only means of generating revenue. The County is currently utilizing many revenue generating opportunities but should always be looking for new ways to generate revenue. Some of these opportunities include:

- Sponsorships from local private businesses. Sponsorships typically come in the form of products, events, programs, cause-related, and in-kind. Sponsorships can also take the form of naming rights for a facility or program. Sponsorship or naming agreements should include very specific details related to sponsorship cost, duration, use of promotional materials, etc.
- Grant applications from local foundations, state and federal agencies, or individuals are typically created by staff. Most grants take time to prepare and require coordination effort with other agencies or departments from within the community to create a quality submittal. Grants also require extensive tracking of expenditures and outcomes for attaining future funding.
- Partnerships are a relatively new method of sharing funding resources to provide services. These partnerships can be formed with a wide variety of other public or private agencies. Many times, the partners are two or more government agencies. Through these partnerships, the County receives direct benefit in either facility use, programming assistance, or volunteer man hours. All of these benefits add value and help offset costs; thus creating earned income. This earned income requires both agencies to have common visions, values, and goals for the partnership to be successful. Examples of partnerships include:
  - Church facilities for recreation services. Several churches or religious organizations in the county are providing recreation facilities and programs.
  - Youth sports associations are an important partner in organizing and programming many youth sports in the county.
  - Trail sponsors that adopt sections of trails for maintenance and cleanup.
  - Adopt-a-park partners that help maintain park lands. These sponsors are typically in the form of neighborhood associations and businesses that are in proximity to parks.
  - School partnerships where both partners invest in the development of facilities and programs based on shared use of facilities and staff. This investment may be financial or may include other means of support.
  - Special event partners that assist with the development of community-wide events.
  - Program partners who assist in providing services to the community.
  - Advertising and licensing in programs, facilities, and events sponsored by the County. The County could leverage highly exposed advertising space to businesses willing to pay a fee for the right to advertise.
  - Volunteer development programs can reduce staff costs. Volunteers can create advocacy and bring down the cost of programs and services.

Privatizing the development of facilities or services is an opportunity that is used by some departments when they are unable to control the cost of labor and are unable to find the needed capital to develop a recreational facility or a concession operation. This gives the government agency a management tool to create an asset or improve a service without tapping into their own resources. Facilities that are typically considered for privatization include golf courses, marinas, camping and RV facilities, boat rentals, bike rentals, equipment rentals, and other forms of concessions.



Marketing strategies are an important component in developing untapped revenue opportunities. Promotional activities improve awareness of the activities provided by the County and assist in bringing more revenue to the system by filling programs and facilities.

## 7.2 Methods of Land Acquisition

In order to meet the needs identified in this report, the County will need to expand its park and recreational lands, and there will be a need for future land acquisition. Methods available for acquiring the land include the following:

### *Fee Simple Purchase*

Outright purchase is perhaps the most widely used method of obtaining land. Fee simple purchase has the advantage of being relatively simple to administer and to explain to the general public to justify a particular public expenditure. Unfortunately, fee simple purchase often is the most expensive means of obtaining and utilizing a property.

### *Fee Simple Purchase with Lease-Back or Resale*

This technique of land acquisition enables the County to purchase land to lease or sell to a prospective user with deed restrictions that would protect the land from abuse or development. This method is used by governments who impose development restrictions severe enough that the owner considers himself to have lost the major portion of the property's value and it is more economical for him to sell with a lease-back option.

### *Long-Term Option*

A long-term option is frequently used when a property is considered to have potential future value though it is not desired or affordable at the time. Under the terms of a long-term option, the County agrees with the landowner on a selling price for the property and a time period over which the County has the right to exercise its option. The first benefit of this protective method is that the option may stabilize escalating land cost and establish land use for the property. Secondly, the County does not have to expend large sums of money until the land is purchased. Thirdly, the purchase price of the land is established. The disadvantage of this method is that a price must be paid for every right given by the property owner. In this case, the cost of land use stabilization and a price commitment comes in the form of the cost of securing the option.

### *First Right of Purchase*

This approach to acquiring land eliminates the need for fixing the selling price of a parcel of land yet alerts the County of any impending purchase which might disrupt the land acquisition goals. The County would be notified that a purchase is pending and would have the right to purchase the property before it is sold to the party requesting the purchase.

### *Land Trust*

The role and responsibility of a Land Trust is to acquire park land and open space while maintaining a well-balanced system of park resources representing outstanding ecological, scenic, recreational, and historical features. A Land Trust is a 501 (c) (3) not-for-profit corporation made up of key knowledgeable leaders in the area who represent a cross section of interest and experience in recreation, historic properties, conservation, preservation, land development, and environmental issues. Their goals and

responsibilities are to work with landowners to acquire park land for current and future generations. The individuals appointed to the Land Trust must have knowledge of land acquisition methods and tools used to entice landowners to sell, donate, provide easements, life estates, irrevocable trusts, or a combination of all. This includes seeking out a knowledgeable land acquisition attorney who is trained in these areas to provide the most efficient and effective processes to achieve the balance of types of land to meet the goals of this Master Plan.

The County does not have to go through the time and expense of setting up a land trust to utilize this vehicle for land donation or conservation. The Catawba Lands Conservancy and the Nature Conservancy are established land trusts in the area. The County has and should continue to partner with them to provide protection of valuable open space without creating a new entity.

### *Donations*

A significant, and yet often untapped, source for funding for acquisition and development of public park projects is through a well-organized local gifts program. Donations of land, money, or labor can have a meaningful impact on the development of the Parks and Recreation Department.

The most frequently used type of gift involves the giving of land to be used for a park. The timing of such a donation can correspond with a PARTF grant application, thereby providing all or a significant portion of the local matching requirement associated with this fund. A similar use of gifts involves donated labor or materials, which become part of an improvement project and help to reduce project costs. The value of the services or materials can, in some cases, also be used to match non-local grant funds.

Some agencies have developed a gift catalog as a tool for promoting a gifts program. Such a publication should explain the role and importance of the gifts program, describe its advantages, define the tax advantages that may occur to the donor, and identify various gifts (land, labor, play equipment, materials, trees, etc.) that are needed to meet program needs. The gifts catalog should be prepared in a format that can be distributed effectively and inexpensively and should provide a clear statement of needs, typical costs associated with various gifts, and be made readily available to the public.

To aid this type of gift program, a strategy for contacting potential donors (individuals, businesses, foundations, service clubs, etc.) should be developed. An important part of this strategy should include contacting the local Bar Association, trust departments of lending institutions, and the Probate Court. Communicating with these groups regularly will make them aware of the potential for individuals to include a gift to the County as part of their tax and estate planning.

### *Life Estate*

A life estate is a deferred gift. Under this plan, a donor retains use of their land during their lifetime and relinquishes title to such land upon their death. In return for this gift, the owner is usually relieved of the property tax burden on the donated land.

### *Easement*

The most common type of less-than-fee interest in land is an easement. Property ownership may be viewed as a combination of rights. With this understanding, it is possible to purchase any one or several of these rights. An easement seeks either to compensate the landholder for the right to use their land in some manner or to compensate them for the loss of one of their privileges to use the land. One advantage of this less-than-fee interest in the land is the private citizen continues to use the land while the land remains on the tax records: continuing as a source of revenue for the County. Perhaps the

greatest benefit lies in the fact that the county purchases only those rights that it specifically needs to execute its parkland objectives. By purchasing only rights that are needed, the County is making more selective and efficient use of its limited financial resources.

### *Zoning/Subdivision Regulations*

Many communities in North Carolina have zoning ordinances and subdivision regulations that require a developer to donate a portion of the property they are developing to the government agency to be used for public park land. Through these regulations (zoning ordinances, subdivision regulation, and mandatory dedications) developers may be required to provide new park land at no cost to the County. Regulations can require land to be dedicated and/or compensation made to the County for the development of parkland.

A detailed evaluation of all subdivision ordinances for each of the municipalities in the county, as well as the County's subdivision regulations, should be made. Wherever feasible, subdivision regulations should include some provisions for the dedication of land for open space or recreational use. Care should be taken in developing any regulation requiring such dedication. Subdivision requirements should include terminology to ensure the permitting agency has the authority to review and approve any land dedicated as public open space or for recreational use to ensure it is usable for such purposes. Likewise, dedication ordinances should have a provision for payment in lieu to eliminate the dedication of property too small to provide community benefits or unsuitable for park development.

Some of these activities and facilities are already found within the County. Many of these potential tourism attractions are in the public realm or are a public/private venture.

## **7.3 Operational Recommendations**

County leadership must also address some of the operational issues that will face the Department in the coming decade. These issues relate to the manpower and organizational changes that will be required as the County adds new parks/facilities. These recommendations address some of the critical operational issues the Department needs to identify as it expands the facilities and services it provides.

An important aspect of these planning recommendations is to develop a vision for the Department to improve park, recreation, and senior opportunities for county residents. Ultimately, the provision of better parks and recreational programs includes both facility improvements and establishing a method of delivery of services. Currently, the County is limited in the resources it directs to this mission. If the County is to improve the quality of parks, recreation, and senior services offered, it will be required to add staff to manage/operate facilities and provide services.

The following are the goals and recommendations for Gaston County Parks and Recreation Operations:

### **Seek & develop partnerships with other recreation providers:**

- a) Expand programming partnerships with Gaston County municipalities; assign responsibilities; municipalities to provide more active recreation
- b) Continue partnerships with Catawba Lands Conservancy and Carolina Thread Trail

### **Maintain quality park management, operations & maintenance on an equitable basis for each facility**

**Strive to provide a greenspace, trail, park, or amenity located within a 15-20 minute walk or drive from each County resident:**

- a) Require Developers to provide parks, greenways & open space within new developments; potential to dedicate greenspace to Gaston County Parks

**Strive to provide funding to maintain or exceed minimum level of service standards & create a sustainable economic base for Gaston County Parks & Recreation**

**Review and re-establish vision, goals and responsibilities of the Parks & Recreation Advisory Board:**

- a) Development of new funding sources relating to Parks & Recreation.
- b) Assist and facilitate additional special events and family festivals.
- c) Assist in the development of long-range planning for programs and facilities.
- d) Promotion of community awareness on the needs for parks & recreation as part of a healthy community.
- e) Review and make recommendations for proposed community projects and acquisitions related to parks, recreation and greenways.
- f) Develop annual work plan; review plan accomplishments with staff.

**Increase community outreach / parks and recreation marketing / social media:**

- a) Hold scheduled 'Meet the Director' gatherings to gain user input; rotate around the parks.

**Ensure the parks & recreation master plan is coordinated with other municipal plans, ordinances and policies**

### *Staff Needs*

Action on the recommendations found in this Master Plan will expand the County's parks and facilities. The development of a new District Park, the management and operation of new trail systems and the facilities at Southpoint Access Area, the construction of new recreation facilities, and the expansion of trails will require additional staff to maintain, operate and program these new facilities. While the development of a true operation and maintenance program for these future facilities is beyond the scope of this Master Plan, the County should plan to add the following positions to effectively operate the future facilities:

- Park Supervisors
- Park Manager at Southpoint Recreation Area
- Greenway/Trail Manager
- Program staff
- New grounds crews (1 foreman, 2 laborers)
- Seasonal park staff
- Senior center staff

It is important that the County plan and budget for adequate staff positions for any new facilities that are constructed. Likewise, as these new facilities come online, the County should actively seek the highest level of programming staff with strong educational experience in the various areas of park and recreation administration.



### *Operational Costs*

As noted above, the development of new recreation facilities will require additional staff. These new staff positions will add to the annual operational budget in terms of both staff and equipment costs. The expansion of recreational facilities could also add to the energy and utility cost of parks, recreation facilities, and senior centers. The recommended facility improvements included in this Plan will increase the County's facilities. Expansion of parks and greenways will have implications to the operational budget. The County's management staff and elected officials must carefully consider the financial impact of each major capital improvement project as projects are considered. No capital improvement project should be undertaken without the commitment of support for adequate ongoing operational funding. Likewise, consideration should be given to the positive economic impacts that some facilities may have on the County's economy, and if applicable, their potential for revenue generation.

### *Greener Operation*

As the world's population expands and environmental concerns over global warming, conservation of resources, and preservation of our fragile natural systems become more apparent, greater environmental responsibility by public and private agencies has become critical. As a government agency, particularly one that is involved with the management of public open space and the improvement of the public's health, the Department's operation should make a concerted effort to minimize its environmental impact.

### *Promoting recycling is one initiative to reduce waste*

With this understanding, the County should evaluate its maintenance and operational procedures with an intent to minimize waste and environmental impact. Where economically feasible, the County should look to implement operational procedures that emphasize conservation, recycling, and sustainability. Likewise, as the County looks to build new facilities, it should consider constructing facilities that minimize environmental impacts, conserve energy, and reuse building materials where possible.

As a starting point for this conversion to a "greener" operation, the County should establish a committee of operation, maintenance, and construction stakeholders to study the options available and develop a plan for becoming "greener".

## **7.4 Facility/Programming Recommendations**

Recognizing that this is a vision plan for a county wide park system, County staff and elected officials must prioritize the recommendations in this document based on the public's input and staff review.

The following park development initiatives have been recommended as priorities for 2024-2033:

### **Trail connectivity – destinations/ regional greenways & trail systems**

- a) Create a county-wide greenway master plan.
- b) Work with Catawba Land Conservancy to acquire land/easements/corridors to create a Greenway from Spencer Mountain to Catawba Cove (South Fork River Corridor).
- c) Enhance/expand trail network at Dallas Park.

**Property acquisition**

- a) Expand leasing opportunities for the Southpoint Access Area from Duke Energy to provide additional passive and water-based recreation.
- b) Seek land to acquire for a park in the northeast part of Gaston County

**Continue upgrades to ensure all parks & facilities are accessible.**

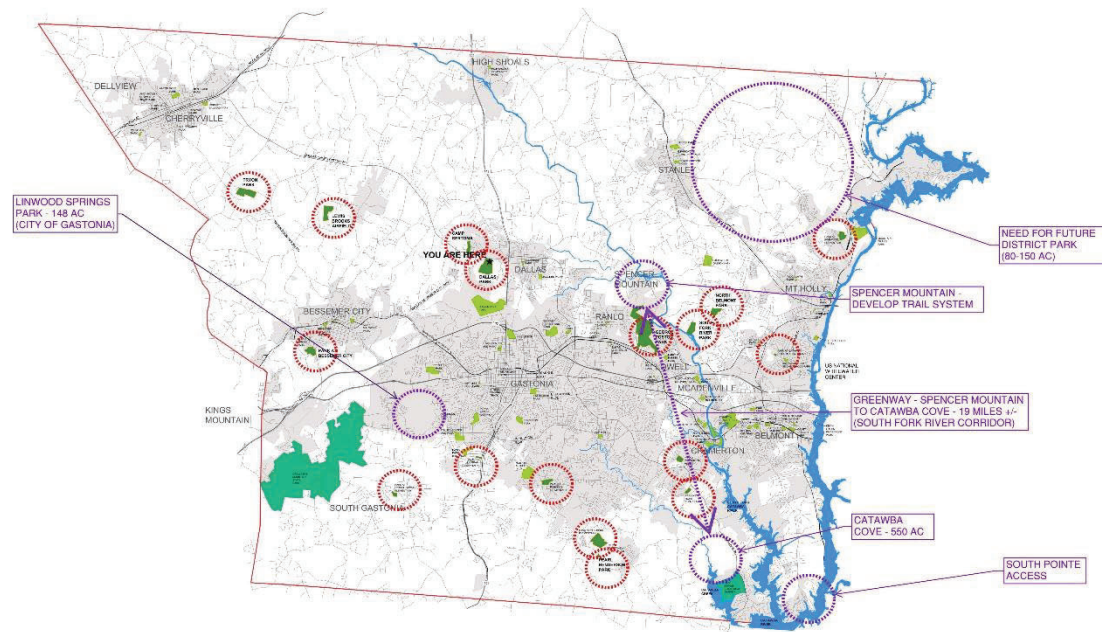
- a) All facilities within each park shall be accessible to each other and to parking.
- b) Complete the ADA upgrades at Dallas Park.
- c) All facilities should be connected to adjacent neighborhoods, greenways, sidewalk systems, where possible.

**Create programming for each Gaston County park & facility:**

- a) Provide educational, healthy & active programs & opportunities for all ages & abilities
- b) Offer excellent opportunities throughout the Gaston County parks system for all to use.
- c) Expand on recent new opportunities such as disc golf, pickleball, fitness stations/clusters or other new sports trends
- d) Provide venues for expanded Senior Olympics events

**Plan, design and phase the construction of Catawba Cove****Seek new park development opportunities in areas underserved by parks:**

- a) Add walking loops to all existing parks where feasible
- b) Seek a location to develop a new District Park in the northeastern quadrant of Gaston County; acquire land and prepare a master plan; include athletic fields, inclusive play equipment, walking paths, recreation center
- c) Provide destination facilities that could also serve as a revenue source for non-Gaston County residents (splash pad, X-country, inclusive playground, etc.)



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## 7.5 Master Plan Funding Strategy

This Master Plan identifies a Vision Plan for park and recreation development and services in Gaston County. It is understood that not all the recommendations will be acted upon over the next decade. The County and elected officials will ultimately have to prioritize the steps they will take to meet some of these park and recreation needs.

- To assist with the prioritization, the following items should be considered by both County Staff, Parks & Recreation Advisory Board, and the elected officials:
- Clearly delineate capital expenses vs. operational expenses.
- Identify any additional staff requirements as a result of proposed projects.
- Identify and evaluate areas of future development.
- Prepare potential risk assessments associated with all elements.
- Prepare proforma and cost benefit analysis demonstrating each project's value to Gaston County.
- Revenue sources must be identified and verified - Projected tax base growth, Land sales, User fees, Partnerships, Sponsors, Grants, General Fund, Bond Referenda, etc.
- Project timelines for each project and tasks involved.

