

GROWING POPULARITY

More and more companies, many with international ties, are choosing Gaston County because of its workforce, location and bright future.

GNT Group is globally known for its natural food colorings, including EXBERRY. It's made from fruit, vegetables and edible plants and is found in many everyday grocery items. "I can't disclose all our customers, but when you see 'food and vegetable juice for color' on a label, that's likely EXBERRY," says Stefan Hake, CEO of GNT USA. "It's in yogurt varieties, sports drinks, vitamin-fortified drinks, fruit snacks, cereals — anything you can think of." More than 11,500 tons of it is produced annually. That's enough to color 40 billion servings of food and drink.

GNT, which counts customers in 75 countries, is headquartered in the Netherlands and has offices in South America, Asia, Europe and the Middle East. And as part of the manufacturer's recent strategic growth plan, it chose to launch a North American expansion from Gaston County.

Hake says Gaston County's reputation for workforce and infrastructure, including a copious supply of water — a key ingredient in making natural food colorings — sealed GNT's decision. "Gaston County has a history of training people in the textile industry, and that played a big role," he says. "And within 300 to 400 miles of our factory, we can have farmers who we can build that relationship with to supply our facility. When you look at the labor force, the infrastructure and road access, it became pretty clear that North Carolina, and specifically Gaston County, were very competitive."

GNT announced a \$30 million factory on 50 acres in Apple Creek Corporate Center in 2020. It was the Dallas industrial park's first tenant. In fact, Apple Creek didn't exist when GNT started its search for a North American location.

"When we talked to [Gaston County Economic Development Commission officials] three years ago, we just saw grass," Hake says. "It's a big undertaking for the county to do all the grading and get all the permits; there's risk involved. But we felt very comfortable, and we started in October 2021, and we opened our facility on time and on budget."

GNT isn't the only company that has recently chosen to locate or expand in this corner of North Carolina. Five of Apple Creek's 10 sites, for example, were purchased or under option when it opened in May. "The success of the park happened much faster than anyone anticipated," says Leslie Campbell, Gaston EDC's director of business recruitment.

Myriad reasons bring companies to Gaston County. "Gaston County has worked diligently to

provide a complete package of amenities for companies that we locate," says Donny Hicks, Gaston EDC's executive director. "This includes having speculative space and shovel-ready sites available with utility systems that support their needs and a unified, clean permitting process to ensure they can build as quickly as possible with reduced risk." But workforce, location and a bright future are the biggest.

AVAILABLE WORKFORCE

KNOLL America is one of nearly a dozen German manufacturing companies in Gaston County. As of last October, foreign direct investment here accounted for almost \$400 million and 1,000 new jobs, according to Gaston County. "We've always had a strong presence of foreign companies in the region," Campbell says.

"[Charlotte Douglas International Airport] plays a big role in that. [Economic Development Partnership of North Carolina] has been a great partner in recruiting companies."

Workforce availability attracted KNOLL America, which manufactures, engineers and distributes conveying, filter systems and pumps used by metal processors, to Gaston County. It announced an initial investment of \$7.9 million to relocate its headquarters and factory to Apple Creek from Michigan in June 2021. Construction is underway on the factory, which is expected to open in April and create 31 jobs. "We always felt like Gaston has a good labor workforce," says KNOLL America CEO Lothar Burger. "And they're more of a hands-on workforce. They're not city slickers. We needed people who weren't afraid to get dirty fingers."

The Apprenticeship 321 program provides training "for those who enjoy working with their hands," according to its creator, Gaston College. That's done through job-specific courses, mentorships and tuition-free education that are paired with paying positions at more than 30 local companies. Occupation pathways include HVAC, industrial electrician, machine set-up operator, welder, tool and die maker, mechatronics technician and several medical fields. The college's Career and Technical Education Division trains students for skilled trades and fields related to science, technology, education and math — STEM — among others.

"Gaston College has been the No. 1 workforce training program in the state of North Carolina the past few years, meaning they have the most open workforce



Crowders Mountain State Park; An aerial view of the F.U.S.E. District, home of the Gastonia Honey Hunters baseball team; The historic, renovated Loray Mill; The Gastonia Technology Park; The Gastonia Convention Center

training programs with companies," Campbell says. "The college plays a critical role in our ability to successfully recruit companies."

KNOLL America has established a temporary office at Gaston College's Center for Advanced Manufacturing, while waiting for its buildings to be completed. "We have negotiated for advanced technical training at the college, and we have some youngsters from high school in the Apprenticeship 321 program, where we will train them in our products and equipment," Burger says. "Michigan treated us well, but we are here for the long haul, and our employees have a permanent home, so a long-term relationship is important for us. It creates loyalty for our customers."

CTL Packaging, which has

operations in France and Spain, set up its factory a decade ago, when it purchased 100 acres at Gastonia Technology Park on U.S. 321, not far from the interchange with Interstate 85. It produces plastic tubing for consumer products, such as makeup, for Estee Lauder, L'Oreal, Johnson & Johnson, and others. "The projected investment was \$100 million over 10 years, and we've reached now about \$60 million worth of capital put into this company," says CTL Packaging USA CEO Manuel Diez. "And we will continue to put money into it for the foreseeable future. We are very much in line with what we started with our objectives."

CTL's workspace is filled with sophisticated equipment. "And we have plans to add more and keep growing our investment in the

U.S," Diez says. Staffing it requires a team effort. Gaston College's workforce program previously partnered with the company, which has added other methods of finding local talent for jobs whose pay ranges from \$15 to \$40 per hour.

"We are designing internal training processes to bring people up to speed and bring them into our production process," he says. "We need a very quick turnaround to teach people how to use our machines, and that has been our focus internally the last two or three years. We are starting an apprentice program ... and we had a bunch of students come from high schools a few weeks ago to tour, so we can attract some individuals to the process of what we do."

PRIME LOCATION

Gaston County covers about 356 square miles, which ranks it 73rd among North Carolina's 100 counties. But it punches above its weight when it comes to people. It had 228,618 residents in July 2020, according to the N.C. Office of State Budget and Management, making it the state's ninth most populous. "The cities have developed great downtowns and have worked to build housing near the center of cities to attract young families," Campbell says. "Health care growth has seen a new hospital in Belmont. There are more higher-end multifamily projects in Belmont and Gastonia, offering new and different housing options. And there's continued expansion of the greenway system."

KNOLL America discovered an established "neighborhood" when it arrived in Gaston County. "There is a huge German community in the Charlotte-Gastonia region, and the region was heavily into textiles," Burger says. "There is a great sense of community, when you see there already are some German subsidiaries in this corridor. And you have to have the quality of life. The cost of living is not as high as New York. All these things play a large role in the growth of a company."

Burger also points to Gaston's central location. "My customers are [original equipment manufacturers] who make milling machines, drilling and sewing machines, and we also have direct customers like Boeing or FedEx or GE Aviation, which makes

turbines for aircraft, and they have machines that make the parts, and they have our equipment as well," he says. "Usually, big customers buy machines to make a big part, and we are part of those machine tools. I've always been interested in technology and high-end equipment, and I decided to help this German company start in the U.S. Apple Creek fit our needs the best, and the county was flexible when they fulfilled our need for 12 acres. And it was very important to have the logistics. We can reach 80% of our customers in one day. I like the small-town atmosphere, and there's a lot of opportunity to move something here, a lot of international business and young professionals. It's not as saturated as other places, and that's kind of good."

Gaston's East Coast location



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Apple Creek Corporate Center



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APPLE CREEK AT A GLANCE:

- 300+ acre county-owned development
- Conveniently located 4.5 miles north of I-85 and 20 miles west of Charlotte Douglas International Airport
- 5 development-ready sites available for large to mid-sized manufacturing operations
- Now home to GNT, USA Inc., HÄNS Kissle, and KNOLL America, Inc.



and logistics connections were big drivers in CTL's decision, too. "We developed a new technology about 15 years ago, and we wanted to test this technology in a country with enough market to allow us to test, and we chose the U.S. because it's the largest cosmetic market in the world," Diez says.

"So, 50% of that market happens in the eastern side of the U.S. — in New York, New Jersey, a little bit of Pennsylvania — but the problem is people want to leave New England because it's too expensive. The South is where you see a lot of companies settling, like North and South Carolina and Georgia. So, we

identified that from the beginning. In the end, we chose North Carolina, and we had a great deal from the county, and we're very happy to be here."

Hake says choosing Gaston was the right decision for GNT for many reasons, but access to farmland was one of the biggest. "The local



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Gaston County Economic Development assists companies seeking to expand or establish operations in Gaston County by coordinating or providing:

- Expansion Assistance/Property Searches
- Fast Track Permitting
- Market Research Assistance
- Employment and Workforce Recruitment Assistance
- Training & Retraining – Community Connection
- Business to Business Introductions
- Networking Opportunities
- Incentive Grant Program
- Communication Assistance
- Utility Assistance



farm connection is a long-term process," he says. "What we're doing now is some field tests with farmers to see what we can grow, some varieties of carrots and sweet potatoes. It's a long journey. You can't rush nature. And we're very happy in Gaston County. I couldn't ask for a better partner than the EDC, and the community has welcomed us with open arms. We're very happy with everything and look forward to a long-term partnership."

THE LONG HAUL

CTL sources raw materials from across the United States and imports components from Europe. "We bring in a 40-foot container every two or three days, and we truck out pretty much the same amount," Diez says. "We

don't make the contents, just the packaging, and we've made about 32 million pieces this year ... in this facility so far, and we continue to grow at about a 20% rate. We continue to invest, and we continue to grow. We aim to be in the top three manufacturers in the U.S. in the next four or five years."

Burger says KNOLL America has made a long-term commitment to the U.S. and Gaston County. "We want to find local vendors, invest in local talent like we do in Germany and make sure we don't become mediocre," he says. "We want to show we can be the leader in the industry. We need good talent, where everyone wants to work and everyone has windows. Everything is open — no cubicles. I think these days, especially for the younger generation, it's not so

much about money as it is a good benefits package, working flexible hours. You don't want to spend eight hours in an ugly place."

Hake calls Gaston County residents industrious. "I think that's an interesting point in today's society, that we got a little bit away from the 'making,' and it should get more credit," he says. "What we have experienced from those we have hired is that they are very proud of what they make. You need a combination of everything — people to think strategically, people with ideas and people who will get their hands dirty to make something. It's in the DNA of Gaston County to make products. We're all in this together." ■

— *Kathy Blake is a writer from eastern North Carolina.*

GASTONIA MIXES HOMETOWN FEEL WITH BIG CITY AMENITIES

When Walker Reid reminisces about his hometown, where he now serves as mayor, he almost always mentions that in a few years it may not look like the same city he once knew. And he's right. Gastonia, whose history is steeped in entrepreneurial spirit, started as a mill town. But it's transforming into one of the region's best places to work, live and play.

Gastonia is growing because it offers modern amenities typically found in big cities while retaining a hometown feel. No where is that mix more evident than downtown, which continues to be a popular choice for location scouts working on commercials, television shows and movies. A quick 20-minute drive from well-connected Charlotte Douglas International

Airport, it most recently welcomed FUSE — Franklin Urban Sports and Entertainment District. While office space has been part of the mixed-use development since it was proposed about five years ago, it also is home to plenty of residential space, including Loray Mill Lofts, Trenton Mill Lofts and Center City Crossings, whose 90 apartments are under construction.

The heart of FUSE is CaroMont Health Park. It's where the Gastonia Honey Hunters, one of the Atlantic League of Professional Baseball's newest clubs, plays its games. While America's pastime may be its primary use, the multiuse stadium can be reconfigured to host other events such as concerts, festivals and youth sports tournaments.

FUSE offers more than a fun time. There's plenty of good eats steps away. Choose from upscale eateries, such as Webb's Custom Kitchen, which is inside a former theater, pitas, pizza, Italian food, Dominican dishes, soul food, Mexican food and more. And craft-beer maker Dirty Bull Brewing will open later this year to complement Cavendish Brewing.

There's plenty more attractions, from shopping along East Franklin Boulevard and at Eastridge Mall to cruising Rankin Lake in a rented paddle boat. And if you're a history buff, visit African American Museum of History and Culture at Loray Mill and Schiele Museum of Natural History, an affiliate of Smithsonian Institution. ■

A New Name Blossoms At The DSBG Orchid Conservatory

In gratitude for his longtime service and commitment to Daniel Stowe Botanical Garden, the Orchid Conservatory is now the William H. Williamson, III Orchid Conservatory.

The commitment and passion of William H. Williamson, III aka "Bill Will" for the Garden has existed since its inception. In 2008, he co-chaired the campaign to build the beautiful Orchid Conservatory. His dedication became a vision realized — an experience of orchids and tropical species among butterflies and special displays that consistently amazes visitors.

Please join us in celebrating Bill Will, a remarkable community leader and his passionate, selfless service. We invite you to come experience the beautiful William H. Williamson, III Orchid Conservatory and the delightful renovated Perennial Garden.



DSBG Daniel Stowe Botanical Garden
6500 S New Hope Road | Belmont, NC 28012 | DSBG.org

CHOOSE GASTONIA. GREATNESS.

As the second-largest city in the Charlotte Metropolitan Area, Gastonia is blossoming into a city filled with great people, great places, and great promise. Our growing FUSE District, expansion of the third best health care system in North Carolina, workforce development investment, multi-million dollar investments in Downtown Gastonia, and access to numerous natural amenities are a fraction of what's coming to Gastonia.

Our access to Interstate 85, US Highway 21, and the Charlotte-Douglas International Airport continues to spur interest for international and domestic companies to choose Gastonia as a prime location for business.

GASTONIA
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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PIEDMONT LITHIUM DIGGING ITS WAY INTO GROWING BATTERY INDUSTRY

It's not gold that lies about 325-feet deep along a 24-mile stretch that runs from the Cleveland-Gaston County line to Lincoln County. But the tin-spodumene found there is almost as valuable. It contains the country's highest concentration of lithium, which when turned into lithium hydroxide becomes a vital component of the rechargeable batteries that power electric vehicles, smartphones and other devices.

Belmont-based Piedmont Lithium completed a bank feasibility study in December for its Carolina Lithium Project in Gaston County, which it says could be one of the world's largest and lowest-cost producers of lithium hydroxide once a state mining permit and county rezoning are obtained. The company aims to produce about 160,000 tons of spodumene concentrate annually, which will create about 22,700 tons of battery-grade lithium hydroxide. Rock Tech Lithium, for example, recently opened a plant in Europe that can produce about 26,500 tons of lithium hydroxide each year,

enough for about 500,000 EVs.

Cashing in on the North Carolina deposit isn't a simple process. "After spodumene is quarried, it goes through a concentration process that removes other minerals, such as quartz and feldspar, which, in some cases, are sold for other applications," says Piedmont Lithium President and CEO Keith Phillips. "The spodumene is then processed with other natural products, like soda ash and lime, to produce the finished product: battery-grade lithium hydroxide. The demand for lithium is expected to more than double from 2021 levels by 2025 and continue to grow by nearly seven times the 2021 level by 2030."

Phillips cites a recently completed economic impact study by UNC Charlotte Professor of Financial Economics John Connaughton. It details the financial benefits — to the company and the community — of tapping into the tin-spodumene deposit. "The project will provide an estimated \$210 million in labor compensation over the first five years," Phillips says. "Additionally, the

study projected \$3.9 billion in total economic impact in the first five years, including \$1.2 billion economic impact in construction alone."

The Lithium Project has 33 employees with plans to hire about 400 more. Many of those mechanics, electricians and control-room operators will be trained through a developing partnership with Gaston College's Center for Advanced Manufacturing. Phillips says starting annual salary for some of those positions is \$82,000. "We have worked diligently to establish ourselves as a good corporate neighbor in the community, forging partnerships and supporting key organizations such as Habitat for Humanity of Gaston County, the Schiele Museum, Gaston College, the local chambers of commerce, Adopt-A-Highway, the Gastonia Honey Hunters, and many more local businesses and not-for-profit organizations," he says. ■

— Kathy Blake is a writer from eastern North Carolina.



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While Gaston County sometimes is hidden by Charlotte's shadow, its future as a tourist destination grows brighter by the day. Whether they arrive for the day, weekend or longer, visitors are welcomed with a continuously growing itinerary of things to do and places to eat, drink and stay.

Visit North Carolina, the tourism promotion arm of Economic Development Partnership of North Carolina, says Gaston County visitors spent \$201.5 million in 2020. While that's 30.9% less than the year prior thanks to the COVID-19 pandemic and its stay-at-home orders, Michael Applegate, Gaston County's director of tourism development, says that amount is rising again. "We won't have 2021 figures until August, but we track all of our hotel activity weekly, and as of April 2021, we began surpassing 2019 levels not just 2020 levels," he says. "So, 2019 was an historic year for tourism, and we've been surpassing that on a weekly basis."

Visitors have a variety of places to spend their dollars. Gaston

County has 15 incorporated towns, with county seat Gastonia in the middle, Belmont and Mount Holly in the east, and Kings Mountain and Cherryville in the west. Each community offers unique adventures, whether you want a day outside on a river or inside at a museum.

Visitors also can unwind at eateries, craft breweries, distilleries and name-brand lodging. "We're right here in a quickly growing metro area, but we have access to two rivers, multiple lakes and state parks with dozens of miles of hiking trails," Applegate says. "We try to focus on hike-bike-paddle. We're a hotbed for it in the Southeast at a location that's easy to get to, and that's our story to tell."

OUTDOORS

Applegate fields many questions about Gaston County. And a few years ago, someone asked for the can't miss attraction. "I said Crowders Mountain, because that's the icon," he says. "That's where people take their selfies. That's where

people get out of their cars and say it's where they want to go."

Pet-friendly Crowders Mountain State Park has 11 trails through its 5,210 acres, which are a 15-minute drive west of downtown Gastonia. Hikers can climb to the mountain's 1,625-foot summit — one of two peaks in the park — or walk the 12-mile Ridgeline Trail. The park's 7-acre lake is open for fishing, and there's family-oriented camping sites and ones that are ADA accessible.

The largest piece of Catawba Lands Conservancy land is near Spencer Mountain, where the South Fork River flows through hardwood forests, pasture lands and flower-filled meadows. The South Fork Trail and South Fork River Blueway offer hiking and access for kayaks and canoes, respectively. They are part of the larger Carolina Thread Trail. It opened in 2007, creating a network of trails, greenways, blueways and conservation corridors that link 15 counties in the Carolinas. Seventeen segments of the trail are in Gaston.

Applegate says 500 additional



Gaston Aquatics Center coming soon to Gaston County

Gaston Aquatics is building a regional aquatics center to meet a number of community needs, including: water-based rehabilitation, safety training, strength and conditioning and competitive swimming. To learn more about this 35,000 square foot, two pool facility and how you can be part of a multi-faceted \$10 million project visit GastonAquatics.org.



GoGastonNC.org/coming-soon



COMMUNITY CLOSE-UP GASTON COUNTY

acres have been designated for a 19-mile trail that connects Spencer Mountain to Daniel Stowe Botanical Garden, where 380 acres wait to be explored. "We have great outdoor spaces, and we do what we can to protect them and sustain them, and at the same time keep them open for recreational experiences," he says.

Catawba Riverkeeper, a nonprofit that advocates for the protection and preservation of its namesake waterway, rents kayaks, canoes and stand-up paddleboards at The Boathouse on the South Fork River. Its Thursday Evening Paddle Series, which features guest speakers, launches from seven different sites from April through June. "What better way to promote the foundation than hosting people on the water and

educating visitors about why we protect this resource," Applegate says. "Whether it's on land or on water, we're going to do everything we can to protect and preserve this natural resource. Let's protect it then activate it. Let's have a plan. Let's let new residents know they have great spaces to enjoy as well. And by virtue of doing that, we're telling people from Richmond, Virginia, to Atlanta, spend a few hours here and explore."

Mount Holly will have a place to learn about the forest environment when the Mountain Island Educational State Forest opens on about 2,000 acres. "A visitors center is under construction," Applegate says. "And the center is going to be a great combination of preservation and active education with access for the public."

INDOORS

Don't worry if inclement weather forces you inside. There are plenty of things to do, starting with Schiele Museum of Natural History in Gastonia. A Smithsonian Institution affiliate, it houses the Southeast's largest collection of mounted land mammals. It has a planetarium, gift shop, and live animal and interactive exhibits. There's a nature trail and recreations of a Catawba Indian village and 18th century farm out back, all under tall trees.

A short drive north to Dallas brings you to Gaston County Museum, where exhibits dive into the county's rich heritage, including its strong ties to the textile industry. See what it was like to stay at a Victorian-era hotel by viewing three rooms filled with period furnishings. There also is a carriage display,

sculpture garden and train depot built in 1903.

Go further northwest to Cherryville, and visit the C. Grier Beam Truck Museum. It's inside the gas station where legendary hauler Carolina Freight started and is filled with trucking memorabilia.

HOTELS AND RESTAURANTS

Much of the recent visitor spending dip is linked to a lack of business travel. But leisure travel was less affected by COVID. "[Gaston County] added 25% more hotel capacity since 2019, and it's in demand," Applegate says.

Recent additions to Gaston lodging include a Hilton Garden Inn and a Fairfield Inn & Suites in Gastonia and a Home2 Suites in Belmont, which is within walking distance of Belmont Abbey College.



Outdoor patio at The Esquire Hotel

There also is the Esquire Hotel in downtown Gastonia, just a few blocks from the Franklin Urban Sports and Entertainment District. It's home to residential and retail projects, a variety of eateries and CaroMont Health Park, a multiuse venue that hosts the Gastonia Honey Hunters baseball team's home games.

Urban renewal is happening countywide. "We've seen a growth in craft beverage and distillery

places, and there are great places to spend some down time after a day of outdoor recreation," Applegate says. "Visit the downtowns, and see what they're doing with their programming, with a summer music series and festivals. Each town is becoming an attraction within itself." ■

— Kathy Blake is a writer from eastern North Carolina.

Go Where The River Takes You

RIVER HAWK

MOUNT HOLLY GREENWAY NORTH CAROLINA



With over ten miles of riverfront trails, the River Hawk Greenway, part of the Carolina Thread Trail, will be the longest in the Charlotte metropolitan area. Joining parks and neighborhoods, traversing woods and creeks, including a Main Street section through historic downtown Mount Holly, the River Hawk Greenway provides a unique outdoor recreation experience and truly connects community & nature. In the next year, Mount Holly will focus on linking The Olde Mecklenburg Brewery project to former textile mills, which are in the midst of exciting undertakings. In addition, blueways and mountain bike trails provide valuable pathways to the Catawba River and our Woods and Water District. To learn more, please visit the parks storymap at the QR code above. #walkthehawk #connectingcommunity&nature

Every story starts with a moment.

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HEALTHY NEWS IN GASTON COUNTY

CAROMONT HEALTH-BELMONT

In September 2020, CaroMont Health entered a long-term partnership with Belmont Abbey College to build a hospital and medical campus adjacent to the private college. CaroMont Health plans to open the facilities, located off Exit 27 on I-85 South, in late 2023 or early 2024. This campus is part of CaroMont Health's commitment to invest more than \$300 million in new and expanded facilities in the Gaston County area by the end of 2024.

CAROMONT REGIONAL MEDICAL CENTER

This will be a 5 floor, 66-bed, 265,000-square foot hospital, including:

- 54 inpatient beds
- A 12-bed observation unit
- 16 emergency department rooms
- A labor & delivery unit
- Suites for surgery, OB/GYN, endoscopy & bronchoscopy
- Imaging and diagnostic services
- Five waiting areas along with chapel and cafeteria amenities

CAROMONT MEDICAL OFFICE COMPLEX

The four-floor buildings of the office complex will include:

- 100,000-square-foot medical office
- 240,000-square-foot parking deck

A STRONG COMMUNITY IMPACT

CaroMont Health-Belmont is projected to encounter as many as 16,000 patients by its first year, growing to 30,000 by year three. It will add approximately 150 jobs to the region. The construction of this second hospital in Belmont will extend CaroMont Health's clinical network to better serve communities in the eastern portion of Gaston County.

For more information, please visit caromonthealth.org.

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