

# Still trending upward

## Tourism spending increases in Gaston for eighth straight year

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Gaston County has increasingly tried to market its outdoor amenities and activities, such as kayaking on the South Fork River in Cramerton, to increase tourism and improve its image. [SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE]

New statistics released this month point to another measured rise in tourism spending in Gaston County last year, continuing a trend that has settled into place over the past decade.

Domestic visitors who traveled within the county's borders spent 3.9 percent more in 2017 than they did in 2016, according to data collected from the U.S. Travel Association. The \$261.8 million total marks the eighth straight year that the take of tourism dollars has increased here from the previous year.

The 3.9 percent hike was less than the 4.2 percent increase seen from 2015-2016. But it was also higher than the 3.1 percent jump observed in the year prior to that.

<b>County</b>	<b>Tourism revenue in 2017</b>	<b>Increase from last year</b>
• Gaston	\$262 million	3.9 percent
• Mecklenburg	\$5.38 billion	4.2 percent
• Cabarrus	\$447 million	3.1 percent
• Iredell	\$257 million	3.8 percent
• Lincoln	\$56.7 million	5.6 percent
• Union	\$139.8 million	4.8 percent
• Cleveland	\$110.1 million	2.9 percent

The top attractions here are largely what they've been for many years, including places such as Crowders Mountain State Park, the Schiele Museum of Natural History and Daniel Stowe Botanical Garden. But Gaston County Travel and

Tourism Director Michael Applegate also pointed to the efforts of the GO Gaston campaign of the last two years, to successfully market more natural destinations and activities. That campaign has attempted to lure visitors to experience the county's rivers, creeks, biking paths, hiking trails and other such activities.

"We are proud to represent such a vibrant collection of outdoor recreation opportunities," he said. "Given the commitment of many dedicated hospitality industry partners, our destination is an appealing draw and provides visitors with memorable experiences every day."

### **Holding firm**

Overall, Gaston County ranked 17th among North Carolina's 100 counties in total annual visitor expenditures.

Tourism studies focus on visits from people who live more than 50 miles away. Those true visitors are more likely to spend a night in a hotel room, thereby paying occupancy tax, as well as eating at restaurants, buying gas, visiting retail stores and more, Applegate said.

The U.S. Travel Association conducts its annual study of North Carolina counties to assess the economic impact they experience from travelers.

Gaston's nearly \$262 million in visitor spending in 2017 still put it well behind Mecklenburg and Cabarrus counties in the Charlotte metro area. And regionally, Iredell County has closed a gap to nearly equal Gaston with \$257 million in tourism revenue last year. But Gaston remains far ahead of places such as Union and Lincoln counties.

Cleveland County showed one of the lowest gains among counties in the immediate area in 2017, with 2.9 percent growth.

### **Other tourism**

#### **highlights**

- The travel and tourism industry directly employs 2,000 professionals in Gaston County — up 2.6 percent from 2016.
- Total payroll generated by the tourism industry in Gaston County was \$44.6 million — up 8.3 percent from 2016.

- State tax revenue generated in Gaston County totaled \$15 million through state sales and excise taxes and taxes on personal and corporate income — up 3.1 percent from 2016.
- More than \$4.3 million in local taxes were generated from sales and property tax revenue from travel-generated and travel-supported businesses — up 5.4 percent from 2016.

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