

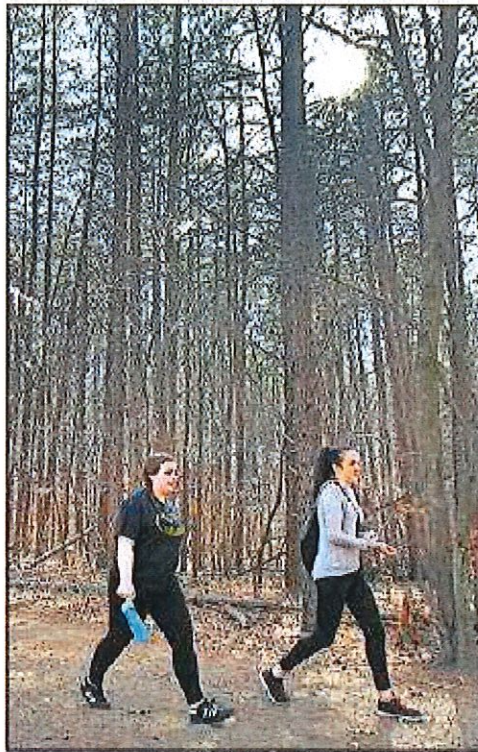
Tourism department receives accreditation

Gaston County agency received the recognition from Destinations International

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Applegate



Hikers make their way through Crowders Mountain State Park in a 2016 photo. The park is one of Gaston County's biggest tourism draws. [JOHN CLARK/THE GASTON GAZETTE]

The folks whose job it is to get Gaston County noticed by the outside world have gotten noticed themselves.

The county's Travel & Tourism Department has been accredited by Destinations International, which runs the Destination Marketing Accreditation Program.

"We pursued accreditation to demonstrate that we embrace the highest quality and performance practices in destination marketing," Gaston Travel and Tourism Director Michael Applegate said in a statement.

Destinations International has membership from 600 destination groups in 15 countries.

There are more than 200 destination organizations that have the DMAP recognition.

The program is widely recognized among destination

marketing

organizations and convention and visitors bureaus. Gaston had to meet industry standards in management and destination marketing, finance, communication and several other categories to earn the accreditation.

Over the past several years, Gaston County has been trying to sell itself as the place to be in North Carolina's Piedmont region for outdoor recreation.

Crowders Mountain State Park is a leading draw for local outdoor enthusiasts, and Gaston County also borders the U.S. National Whitewater Center off the Catawba River. There have also been efforts underway to promote Gaston's lesser-known parks, such as George Poston and Rankin Lake parks, to visitors traveling through.

Tourism is a substantial business in Gaston County.

In 2016, tourists spent about \$251 million here, according to county reports. The tourism industry in Gaston supports nearly 2,000 jobs, is responsible for about \$41 million in pay and generates more than \$18 million in state and local tax collection.

The tourism department itself is funded entirely through a portion of proceeds from a hotel occupancy tax.

The county ranks No. 17 of North Carolina's 100 counties in terms of visitor spending.

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