

GASTON COUNTY TOURISM DEPARTMENT



Gaston Director of Tourism Development Michael Applegate, left, is pictured with Rotarian Dick Cromlish, who is a member of the Gaston County Tourism Advisory Board. PROVIDED BY TED HALL

Marketing draws visitors, boosts local economy

Ted Hall

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Gaston County has a healthy budget for tourism marketing, and that's a good thing, because every dollar invested in attracting tourists returns \$7 in spending by those visitors. Plus, it's the tourists themselves, not local taxpayers, who fund the county's marketing programs through a 3% occupancy tax collected at hotels and other overnight lodging venues.

Michael Applegate, director of Gaston County Tourism Development,

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shared that information and much more when he spoke to the Belmont Rotary Club.

He leads a staff of six and work with a volunteer advisory board to determine how to allocate available dollars. Gaston County has had a tourism board since 1999.

The three main focus areas of the department, Applegate said, are destination marketing (driving visitation), destination management (enhancing the visitor experience) and community viability. The department spends more than \$300,000 per year on tourism marketing, focused within a 250-mile radius, which he described as between Atlanta and Washington, D.C., and Knoxville and Charleston, South Carolina.

Three Gaston municipalities (Gastonia, Belmont and Mount Holly) also have tourism boards and collect 3% hotel occupancy taxes. The county and municipal boards collaborate to align goals and objectives.

Applegate said a key to recent and future success is linking Gaston County's abundance of outdoor recreation experiences to its thriving business districts. And he singled out for special attention three recent developments:

- Catawba Riverkeeper Foundation relocating from Charlotte to McAdenville.

- Rocky Branch Park making Belmont and Cramerton the first municipalities linked by a trail on the Carolina Thread Trail.

- Explosive growth in Crowder's Mountain visitors, now approaching 900,000 per year.

Applegate encouraged Rotarians to keep informed about new developments by joining Gaston Tourism's monthly newsletter list at **www.Go-GastonNC.org**.

About Rotary

Rotary is an international service organization with 1.4 million members in more than 200 countries. "Service Above Self" is the Rotary motto. Rotarians work together to promote peace, fight disease, support education, grow local economies and protect the environment.

Belmont Rotary Club, which will celebrate its 100th anniversary in 2025, meets for lunch and a program on local topics each Wednesday, 12:30 - 1:30 p.m., at the First Presbyterian Church in Belmont. Guests interested in learning more about local businesses and issues and how Rotary serves the community are welcome. For more information, visit www.belmontrotaryclub.com.