

NEWS

How CaroMont Health Park reversed one of Gastonia's most troubled areas

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Traveling east on Franklin Boulevard from the Loray Mill, and CaroMont Health Ballpark rises up from the horizon, transforming a once troubled area of the city into a place people now want to visit.

Gastonia's professional baseball team, the Honey Hunters, make their home in the ballpark, attracting more than 2,000 fans each night in their inaugural season, a total of more than 56,000 visitors through the first 25 home games since opening night on May 27.

Three years ago, the troubled Budget Inn stood at 800 W. Franklin Blvd., a place so crime-ridden the Gaston County District Attorney's Office threatened it with closure as a public nuisance before the city bought the property in 2017. Next to it was the dilapidated, vacant, former Sears building.

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Now passers-by see stadium lights and hear the cheer of fans when the Honey Hunters are in town.

Neighbors notice the difference.

"We used to count police cars at the motel," said Nelson Herrere, owner of the nearby Chaos Tattoo Shop. "One night they had a candlelight vigil for a shooting and the next day someone got stabbed.

"That was regular."

Herrere appreciates the friendly faces and foot traffic that the ballpark brings to his business.

"I love the park because people that hung around the motel used to try to harass the customers and that's just bad for business," said Herrere. "I've been here 12 years and it literally stopped when they tore the motel down, it was amazing."

Place for families

Jeff Wortman now brings his grandchildren to the stadium, something the owner of the neighboring business S&K Automotive says he wouldn't have done when that property included the Budget Inn.

"The park does a lot for kids. They have a fun zone with bouncy houses for kids during the games," said Wortman. "They let the kids play musical chairs on the field too. My grandkids love that."

And the night of fun all comes with a ticket price of just \$7, Wortman adds.

Progress

Gastonia Mayor Walker Reid sees the stadium and the entire Franklin Urban Sports and Entertainment District, also known as FUSE, as a catalyst for change in downtown. Gastonia leaders shelled out \$28 million to build the stadium on a belief private development would be attracted by the buzz created by the Honey Hunters.

"The biggest enhancement it provides has been to the entire downtown area," said Reid. "The streetscape, banners and developments in the area look great."

The park will be used for more than just Honey Hunters games. Gaston College held its spring graduation in the stadium, rather than traveling to Bojangles' Coliseum in Charlotte. Gaston County high schools have also held sporting events there. Churches have held religious events.

What's to come?

High school football could convert the baseball diamond at CaroMont Health Park to a football field this fall. Right now, managers of the stadium figuring out how best to use their newfound asset.

"We're learning a lot about how to put on the different events that are one and done in comparison to the Honey Hunters seasons which include 60 games of the same type of

event," said David Martin, chief operating officer of the Honey Hunters.

Plans for the park include upcoming festivals, comedy shows, and concerts, Martin said.

Future development

A walk outside the walls of CaroMont Health Park puts people in contact with development in an area that city leaders admit has faced decades of neglect.

Durham-based Durty Bull Brewing will open a brewery across from the stadium on Trenton Street. The former Trenton Mill, located next to the Leather & Lace strip club, will soon become loft apartments and retail space.

"We have a bunch of different apartment developments coming like the Trenton Mills Lofts," said Reid.

Trenton Mills Lofts, located on West Main Avenue, will transform a 100-plus year-old mill into 89 loft-style apartments by the end of this year, said Reid.

The upscale cigar and cocktail lounge, Whiskgar's, on West Main Avenue should also open by the fall, said Reid.

"I think the most exciting part is the growth that Gastonia is seeing right now and there's so much interest from developers looking to bring new investments," said Christy Crisp, the city's director of economic development. "All of this is a result of what FUSE has brought us with the excitement around the Honey Hunters and CaroMont Health Park."

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