



## **Gaston (NC) REALTORS®: Small Association Thinks Big in Putting Housing Opportunity Grant to Work—December 2013**

When the economy crashed in Gaston County, NC, it crashed hard. As Teresa MacFarlane, President of the Gaston Association of REALTORS® (GAR), points out, "Gaston County was hit from several different angles. We're a suburb of Charlotte, but we're also a mill town. When textile manufacturing went overseas, there went our economy. It was not unusual for our unemployment figures to be worse than the national average. And then came the housing crisis."

The good news is that industries have started to return to Gaston County, and the housing market is recovering - slowly. A year ago, when MacFarlane became president of the 270-member association, she made it her goal to improve the damaged image of the real estate industry. Her first act was to establish a President's Advisory Committee of long-time members, new members, and affiliates.

GAR is a small association, but thinking big. "Because the housing market is local in nature, and in our market we saw conditions improving, we wanted to raise this awareness with the public," MacFarlane explains. The Advisory Committee decided to capitalize on the town's brand-new conference center, and hold a housing fair. It would be free, and focus on affordable housing.

The housing fair, held on a Saturday this past June, was marketed as "Everything you want to know about our local housing market under one roof, on one day." Nearly 500 people attended, visiting booths of industry professionals ranging from lenders and home inspectors to landscapers and cabinet refinishers. Nearly every vendor offered prizes or give-aways. GAR provided booths free of charge to the YMCA, the local school system, a grant program for first-time home buyers, and the local homebuilders' association, with which it has collaborated in the past. In an effort to attract more affiliate members, GAR waived the application fee for new affiliate members joining because of the event: the affiliate base increased by nearly half.

"The housing fair gave the people of Gaston County the opportunity to be informed as well as educated about the local market," says Ann Drum, GAR's Association Executive, adding that the response from the public was overwhelmingly positive. "People were so excited and grateful that we were offering all these resources for free. It was great for the members, too, enjoying 'face time' with each other, and making contact with potential clients."

GAR was also determined to bring some of its members' REALTOR® Party dues back to Gaston County. A \$5,000 Housing Opportunity Grant from NAR funded the creation of a website for the event. It also supported a portion of the



advertising, allowing publicity for the housing fair to reach more markets, such as predominantly African-American churches. GAR partnered with the major local newspaper, negotiating a bargain for advertising and the printing of all the event materials. It bartered booth space with *The Real Estate Book*, in exchange for advertising, both in print and online.

Building on the success of this year's fair, the REALTORS® of Gaston County have just been awarded a second Housing Opportunity Grant, in support of a second annual housing fair this coming April. Eager to bring its education and information to as many local residents as possible, GAR will add a component reaching out to the area's growing Asian and Latino populations.

*To learn more about how the REALTORS® of Gaston County, North Carolina are educating and empowering home buyers, contact Ann Drum, Association Executive of the Gaston Association of REALTORS®, at [ann@gastonrealtors.com](mailto:ann@gastonrealtors.com) or 704-867-4826.*