

Ruston, Louisiana

Planning for Economic & Fiscal Health

Report and Suggested Next Steps

USDA Rural Development Rural Community Development Initiative (RCDI)

1. Create an advisory and implementation committee including the interests present at the workshop, to implement these action items.

Short-term Actions (1-6 months)

- Hold the first meeting of this body soon after receiving this finalized memo and establish a regular meeting schedule (at least monthly)
- Elect a chair and designate a lead for each of the recommended action items
- Report back to the city on a regular basis

Led by City staff, smaller subcommittees will be created to better facilitate the four primary topics of the Next Steps report: Planning & Zoning, Downtown, Economic Development, and University Relations. The subcommittees will communicate monthly and staff will help coordinate overlap between topics and committees. Staff have internally submitted several names as potential members for each subcommittee.

Medium- and Long-term Actions (6 months and longer)

- Ensure that this body continues meeting on a regular basis and that all members are encouraged to be engaged in the process

Staff and subcommittees will have regular discussions to ensure plans and action items are moving forward.

2. Foster land uses that create fiscally sustainable development patterns.

- It is extremely important that large institutions, like research universities and regional medical centers remain close to downtown to provide synergies.

The staff committee members will speak with the Administrators of Northern Louisiana Medical Center and Green Clinic about their intentions for relocation. Louisiana Tech University has proven their commitment to downtown as evidenced by their continued growth towards the

Downtown Center, including the Integrated Engineering and Science Education Building that recently opened one block from Downtown Ruston.

The City is currently developing a new zoning classification correlating with the Monroe Street corridor redevelopment project and Rock Island Greenway that utilizes Smart Growth principles (higher density, pedestrian friendly design, multi-modal transportation).

City staff will continue developing corridor rezoning plans for Farmerville Highway and Cooktown Road.

3. Revisit existing master plan.

- Audit plan to find elements that are out of date or don't fit with the city's long-term objectives
- Include elements that further city's goals for downtown

Staff and committee members will utilize the Smart Growth plan as a roadmap to help ensure the master plan includes pertinent information and is consistent with Ruston's long-term goals. As this may require an Ordinance to revise the master plan, updates will be suggested towards the latter end of 2020 to ensure a full compilation of suggestions.

4. Audit current land use policies and zoning regulations.

- Building codes: enforcements and incentives
- Open vacant second story windows

Short- and Medium-term Actions (1-12 months)

- Audit local ordinances impacting outdoor dining to allow more establishments to allow patrons to eat and drink outside where space allows

City staff will investigate the history of current ordinances effecting the presence of outdoor dining then determine if a change in the ordinance is possible to allow for outdoor dining.

City staff will assess local building codes to identify design standards that can be relaxed or waived as concession to incentivize Smart Growth practices.

Long-term Actions (12 months and longer)

- Reform regulations to provide clarity and ease barriers to infill development and ultimately encourage such development.

City staff will continue researching inventive methods to incentivize infill development (ex. facade improvement grant/low-interest loans, relaxing setbacks and height restrictions) by reviewing best practices and interviewing developers.

5. Develop a cohesive plan for the integrated use of legacy buildings and historic structures in downtown Ruston.

- Heard Freighthouse (sic) / Federal Building / Dixie Theatre

Short-term Actions (1-6 months) for recommendations #5 and #6

- Within the advisory and implementation committee identified above, discuss a unified redevelopment of downtown. Work towards reaching a community vision on next steps for the district including prioritization of projects.
- Consider retaining an urban design and/or historic preservation consultant with experience doing smart growth projects to work in conjunction with the city's existing economic development consultant and help the community create this vision for downtown through a master plan.

The advisory committee will use the four-point Main Street Approach to help form a unified and cohesive redevelopment plan for downtown. Through open discussions and meetings, the committee will gain community vision and prioritize redevelopment projects. Staff will continue working with the Louisiana Trust for Historic Preservation to develop and implement historic design standards, as well as gain additional insight into long-term planning for redevelopment and integrated use of historic structures. Staff has also incorporated Smart Growth America's report and suggested next steps in the development of the 2020-2021 strategic work plan for Downtown Ruston.

Medium-term Actions (6-12 months) for recommendations #5 and #6

- Research funding options (such as USDA grants and loans, low to moderate income tax credits, TIF districts, historic tax credits and New Market Tax Credits) to help finance various redevelopment projects. Refer to appendix D for some potential resources.
- Proactively begin discussions with property owners of the Dixie Theatre on the community's vision and goals for downtown.
- Create a plan for reuse of each historic building that takes into account the building's historic use to the community and its best, most productive use for the future.
- Explore adopting a downtown form-based code overlay to encourage building and site design that promotes walkability and placemaking.

The City has formed a Cooperative Endeavor Agreement (CEA) with the Dixie Theatre to provide annual funds for operations. The goal of this agreement was to ensure that lines of communication remain open and that the theatre would be regularly programmed. Staff recently

met with the new Executive Director of the Dixie Theatre to begin discussions on the vision and goals for the theatre, as well as ways to better partner to enhance downtown.

Long-term Actions (12 months and longer) for recommendations #5 and #6

- Using available funding sources, implement the community's vision for downtown on a building by building basis, keeping the larger picture of the cohesive vision for downtown in mind.

In the long-term, we will use insight and planning developed in short-term and medium-term actions to implement the overall vision for downtown.

6. Seek new development projects to fill in downtown's "missing teeth" while paying careful attention to building and site design and overall housing supply.

- Repair the street wall and fill in missing teeth
- Site Design
- Consider adopting a form-based code for downtown
- Focus on small lot homes and small format multifamily units

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- Consider retaining an urban design and/or historic preservation consultant with experience doing smart growth projects to work in conjunction with the city's existing economic development consultant and help the community create this vision for downtown through a master plan.

Through a community survey, the Committee and Ruston Main Street Board can create a list of the types of retail or services the community wants to see Downtown and work to recruit those businesses. Staff will continue to work with the Louisiana State Historic Preservation office to identify best practices.

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- Proactively begin discussions with property owners of the Dixie Theatre on the community's vision and goals for downtown.
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Downtown Ruston is a Louisiana Main Street Community, Historic District Community, Cultural District, Downtown Development District, and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Staff and committee members can utilize these designations to determine if other funding methods are available. Ruston already utilizes Historic Tax Credits and Restoration Tax Abatement incentives to encourage Downtown development. Ruston is also located in a New Markets Tax Credit area, which can be utilized for project financing. The committee can research other financing methods that Downtown businesses and building owners may utilize as additional growth and financing options.

Staff also plan to develop an upper-story tour of downtown structures to encourage the future development of those spaces into residential properties to add to the housing options in the downtown area.

Long-term Actions (12 months and longer) for recommendations #5 and #6

- Using available funding sources, implement the community's vision for downtown on a building by building basis, keeping the larger picture of the cohesive vision for downtown in mind.

7. Focus on placemaking and streetscapes with a consistent brand in the city center to make it a destination where people want to visit and to linger.

- Identify one or more "tactical" projects for downtown that are low or no cost to take the first steps.
- Add street name signage at intersections
- Manage parking in downtown
- Alley connections and other amenities to encourage outdoor dining
- Additional downtown lodging
- Community gathering spaces and events
- Other downtown amenities
- Pursue traffic calming through downtown Ruston

Short-term Actions (1-6 months)

- Develop themes for downtown gateway monuments that celebrate Ruston's local and regional identity.
- Identify suitable locations for outdoor entertainment spaces and related amenities in the city center such as benches and trash receptacles.
- Organize volunteers / city staff to implement the identified "tactical" project(s)
- Clean up, paint, and repair vacant storefronts to make them attractive to visitors even though no activity may be occurring inside.

- Identify local ordinances impacting outdoor dining, including on sidewalks, balconies, and in alleys.
- Review local ordinances regarding building upkeep and begin to enforce them where required among downtown building owners.

Staff is in the process of developing a vacant storefront program that will help activate vacant spaces through temporary art displays, pop-up shops, window displays featuring other businesses, idea generation campaigns for the space, and other creative repurposing tactics. Staff has reviewed vacant storefront ordinance, which supports the vacant storefront program, and will take measures to ensure that code enforcement is activated to hold building owners accountable. Staff also plans to review outdoor dining ordinances and research how other communities handle this topic. The Committee will help recruit volunteers when needed to help with tactical placemaking projects, while also utilizing City staff and resources to complete these projects.

The City is partnering with the University, Lincoln Parish Tourism Bureau, and North Louisiana Arts Commission to form an advisory group to organize and oversee an art trail running throughout downtown Ruston and along the Rock Island Greenway. The Art Trail Team will complete its group membership and begin identifying funding sources to subsidize the artist procurement process and creation of exhibits.

Medium-term Actions (6-12 months)

- Implement benches, movable furniture, and trash receptacles at suitable locations throughout all of downtown to encourage residents and visitors to rest and linger.
- Begin discussions with the Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development (LaDOTD) to utilize right of way owned by these agencies to place monuments where they will be visible by motorists.
- Look for opportunities to implement traffic calming measures to slow traffic through downtown, perhaps in partnership with LaDOTD.
- Install additional wayfinding signage that allows visitors to explore and learn about the history of downtown.
- Consider temporarily repurposing one or more parking spaces as outdoor dining at one or more restaurants on nicer days.
- Investigate LED lighting (streetlights and traffic signals) to increase pedestrian safety during evening and nighttime hours while reducing electricity costs.
- Identify a suitable space for a boutique hotel or bed & breakfast and market it through the Convention and Visitors Bureau to potential proprietors within or outside the community.

A main design objective of the 2020-2021 strategic work plan for Downtown Ruston is to continue placemaking efforts throughout downtown. Strategies to reach those objectives include implementing a wayfinding signage system in the downtown area, adding amenities such as bike racks, benches, tables, etc. to encourage people to linger downtown, developing more

community spaces such as repurposed alleyways and pocket parks, and create unique photo opportunities throughout downtown like murals, public art projects, seasonal decor, etc.

A major hurdle to several placemaking tactics that community members and staff would like to implement is the oversight of LaDOTD. We plan to have a sit-down meeting with LaDOTD representatives in the near future to discuss what, if anything, can be done to allow for some of these placemaking tactics that have been denied in the past.

Staff has done research in the past to identify a suitable space in the downtown area for a boutique hotel. Staff will revisit this topic and continue to pursue leads in this area of development.

The Art Trail Team will finalize the trail design and identify funding sources. The Team will dissolve and the project will be folded into one of the partner organizations.

Long-term Actions (12 months and longer)

- Implement building awnings throughout downtown as funding allows.
- Add additional human-scale street lighting around sidewalks and crosswalks leading to the downtown from I-20 and Louisiana Tech. Ensure there is sufficient lighting on connection routes to nearby neighborhoods and the east-west railroad trail.
- Place monuments at gateways to downtown and tree columns leading up to downtown gateways. Ensure that this signage, once placed, receives ongoing maintenance.

The 2020-2021 strategic work plan for Downtown Ruston also includes the development of a facade grant program for downtown building and business owners that would include funding for awning repair and additions.

8. Create a marketing and branding campaign for downtown Ruston including ongoing place management.

- Create a branding and marketing campaign for downtown.
- Invest in marketing and trailblazing at and around the I-20 highway interchange to encourage visitors to visit downtown.
- Market the multi-use trails

Short-term Actions (1-6 months)

- Work with local businesses and other partners to develop a branding and marketing campaign for downtown including a unique identity, informational materials, online presence, and/or a mobile phone app. Ensure all entities (city, parish, chamber, and other partners) use the branding guidelines when referring to downtown.

A downtown branding campaign was launched in September of 2019, including the creation of a “Downtown Ruston” logo, branded hashtag, branding guide, and other graphic elements. A social media presence was also created for the new brand and staff is currently working on the development and launch of an all-encompassing Downtown Ruston website that will include business listings, a calendar of events, an online marketplace, a downtown map, and more resources for residents and visitors. The website is anticipated to be complete by March 2020. Staff is currently working on a marketing plan that will aim at gaining awareness of the new destination brand of “Downtown Ruston.”

Long-term Actions (12 months and longer)

- Ensure that the branding and marketing campaign continues to represent downtown and its amenities by updating it from time to time.

9. Strengthen partnership with Universities so students can make Ruston their own place, and entice them to stay in area after graduation.

- Making a strong partnership stronger

Short-term Actions (1-6 months)

Complete application process for Town and Gown Association (already in progress via John Waltz and Louisiana Tech University partner)

Establish relationships with colleges and departments within those colleges to better utilize students in an internship capacity, as well as utilizing their innovative visioning for projects and development. Encourage local businesses to do the same.

Long-term Actions (12 months and longer)

Establish internship paths to employment in all areas of the city. Working with students from the time they begin an internship, to a potential employment opportunity whether that be on a contract basis or full-time employment.

Develop a process that connects students and faculty to the City, giving them a sense of belonging in this community.

10. Work on cohesion between downtown and Interstate 20.

- Create a corridor of arrival connecting Interstate 20 to downtown Ruston.
- Use building awnings for both shading and business signage
- Improve pedestrian infrastructure including lighting upgrades
- Add signage for both pedestrian wayfinding and trailblazing for drivers

Over the next few years, the Monroe Street Corridor will be upgraded through a U.S. Department of Transportation BUILD Grant, which was awarded to Ruston in November 2019. This project will create another primary connector from I-20 to Downtown and the Louisiana Tech campus. In addition, in the majority of cases, pedestrian infrastructure is being added or upgraded when improvements are made to a city street. Our new City standard is a Complete Street model to accommodate for transportation outside of a vehicle.

City staff is currently in the process of completing a landscape site plan for the Interstate 20 / Highway 167 interchange that will act as a visual northern gateway into downtown. The plan will be submitted to LaDOTD for approval.

As was previously mentioned, a facade grant program is set to be in place before the end of 2021, which will assist building and business owners with awning installation and repair. Wayfinding signage is also set to be installed in the 2020 calendar year in and around the downtown area.

11. Adopt a Complete Streets policy and implementation strategy.

Short-term Actions (within 1-6 months)

- Create a timeline for the adoption of a Complete Streets policy within three to six months. The timeline should consider:
 - Who needs to be involved in the development of the plan.
 - Local elected officials and City of Ruston staff
 - Smart Growth America recommends the city work to bring seniors and people with disabilities together with LaDOTD to work on accessibility issues
 - It is recommended that a meeting and tour with LaDOTD be setup to demonstrate the accessibility issues some citizens face on a regular basis when interacting with state highways
 - This is a fantastic opportunity to affect change not only at a local level but also at a state policy level
 - When to release a draft of the plan to the public.
 - The timing of this release is critical to project success
 - The public should see a draft version
 - What type of feedback it will ask from the community and what it will do with the feedback.
 - To create community buy-in, Smart Growth America recommends sharing a draft of the plan with the public and asking for their buy-in. However, Ruston must be clear on exactly what type of feedback they are looking for (high level, such as does this fit your vision for the city, or more details-oriented, such as what do you think of this sentence) and how

Ruston will use the feedback. This will create transparency and manage expectations for residents.

- Host open houses within the community, otherwise known as meeting people when and where they are at. For example, Ruston could reach out to local church groups or have meetings on weekends, which may be easier for some residents to attend.
- Determine the type of plan(s) to adopt
 - A Complete Streets policy will change and add value to Ruston’s decision-making process. Ruston should identify the type of policy that would be most effective in sparking change, while being realistic about the type of policy that can be passed and implemented successfully. Many communities begin with a simple resolution that then leads to a more complex internal policy.
 - A Resolution will allow the mayor and city council to lead the initiative on Complete Streets and leverage their leadership to highlight the importance of Complete Streets with the public and the media.
 - A Council-adopted ordinance will codify the policy into law.
- Plan a community/press event
 - Ruston should celebrate the success of the adoption of a Complete Streets policy with a public event. This will help educate the public and media about Complete Streets, as well as allow the city and the community to celebrate the passage of the policy.

City staff and subcommittee members will determine if an additional ad hoc group (dubbed “Complete Streets team”) is necessary to create the policy. If so, they will determine roles and representation of that group.

The City of Ruston has implemented key elements of Complete Streets in recent road projects, such as curb and gutter, sidewalks and multi-use paths, grass buffers and street lighting. The City has passed an ordinance (Ord. No. 1692, § 1, 9-12-2016) requiring all new developments with street frontages to construct sidewalks with a grass buffer in the public ROW with situational exceptions for minor subdivisions and rurally zoned areas.

The Complete Streets team will work with Louisiana’s Complete Streets Coalition to determine which policies are most appropriate for the City to adopt in relation to our existing regulations. The City may gather stakeholder input to determine any streets that may utilize the policy for redevelopment.

Medium- and Long-term Actions (6 months and longer)

- Incorporate Complete Streets policy into roadway and intersection redesigns as they occur.