

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Monroe – One City One Future

The City of Monroe is a unique and historic city on the banks of the Ouachita River in Northeast Louisiana. Its citizens epitomize southern charm. With their friendliness and quick wit they help to make the place irresistible. Its natural beauty – that of the Ouachita River, Bayou DeSiard and Black Bayou Lake in particular – contributes to this irresistibility.

Like many cities in the South and all over the United States, Monroe has a wonderful and rich history with legacies of booming economies fueled by – in Monroe’s case – cotton, paper manufacturing, Coca-Cola bottling, railroads and the manufacture of carbon black from the area’s natural gas wells,¹ followed in subsequent years by the finance, health care, education and government sectors.

The city remains the economic hub of northeast Louisiana but it has been buffeted by changes in the economy. Its once robust manufacturing sector has been seriously impacted by the contraction in forest products industries generally and also by the closing of the Guide Automotive Plant. Back-office operations, including the continued strong presence of Century Tel, Chase Bank and call centers like Accent Marketing Services, have helped to somewhat offset these losses.

A post-Hurricane Katrina “growth spurt” helped Monroe reduce unemployment rate to below four percent in 2006 and retail sales and the value of building permits have continued to grow. While these trends cannot be relied upon to continue, the city is proactive in its quest to define a vision of success for itself. To that end the city commissioned this Comprehensive Plan, its first in 20 years. This city has a legacy of planning, appointing its first planning commission in 1957 and adopting zoning and its first master plan in 1960.

In more recent years it has invested in planning including an important regional Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy, Southside Economic Development Plan, Downtown Monroe Streetscape Plan, Southside Collaborative Neighborhood Initiative, a commercial and industrial site selection database is being assembled, numerous transportation studies have been done, including a Traffic Evaluation of Railroad Crossing Closures designed to help the city better accommodate the busy railroads’ noise, safety and traffic impacts, and others studies. These are all valuable efforts that should be coordinated. They have resulted in a wealth of information and the databases that have been assembled for them should be maintained and updated.

¹ Carbon black is essentially soot and it is used as a reinforcing agent in tires and rubber products and also as a pigment.



Over the course of the year-long comprehensive planning process, the priorities for Monroe's future were identified. Jobs and economic opportunity are at the top of the list, certainly. Educational opportunity is also a top priority. But what emerged again and again in public forums, a community survey, interviews, steering committee meetings and focus groups was the need to address specific issues that are perceived as overwhelming constraints on the ability of the city to flourish.

The consensus that has emerged is that a unified Monroe will be an unstoppable Monroe. That is, if the influences that divide the city – race, economic status, educational attainment, residential location – can be overcome, everything else that holds the city back can be conquered. Similarly, residents say the city should look better, should look beautiful; its downtown and riverfront should be restored as the centerpiece of the city; that the educational assets that exist here are unmatched and simply need to be better coordinated from within; and that the city possesses the tools and the raw materials needed to overcome the obstacles it faces, it simply needs to learn how to use them. These things are all true and the recommendations of the plan focus on them.

First impressions can be misguided. Monroe itself is unprepossessing to a first-time visitor; its charms take time to emerge. The friendliness and helpfulness of the people who live here belie deep divisions in the community. During the comprehensive planning process, the citizens of Monroe were brave and honest as they described again and again these divisions: white-black, rich-poor, north Monroe-south Monroe. Issues of race and equality became more topical as the politics of the 2008 presidential election played out. Like the nation, Monroe seems more ready than ever to air its reflections on race in Monroe and in America at the dawn of the 21st century. The nation may well learn much from the conversation that could – and should – take place in Monroe. It is a recommendation of this plan that that conversation be held in Monroe on the record and in front of as many people as can be assembled to hear and take part. They will learn how rich Monroe is and how much there is to know about it.

1.2 Historic Background

1.2.1 Settlement of Monroe

The area now known as Monroe is part of the Ouachita River Valley first inhabited by Ouachita and Caddo Indians. The prehistoric resources that still exist in the region are among the oldest that exist on the North American continent. Fossil outcrops, ancient mounds, earthworks and prehistoric pottery all survive. The earliest European explorer is believed to be Hernando DeSoto in 1542. More than two centuries later, a permanent settlement was developed with the construction of Fort Miro in the 1780s by Don Juan Filhiol.

The area of Louisiana in which Monroe is situated has twice been under the authority of the French and its inhabitants were also once subjects of the monarch of Spain. As a part of the Louisiana Purchase of 1803 (made official in 1804), it joined the United States as a territory, becoming a state in 1812. Determined to know as much as could be known about the territory as could be learned, President Thomas Jefferson sent explorers to navigate its rivers and map its lands. In 1804, Jefferson sent William Hunter and George Dunbar to explore the Red River; they never made it, and instead explored the Ouachita to its headwaters in Hot Springs, AR.



The Fort Miro settlement reached a turning point in May of 1819 when the steamer James Monroe came through the trading post. The coming of the steamboat era facilitated the transportation of goods such as cotton along the Ouachita River and before long cotton was a major economic engine in the Ouachita Valley. The Fort Miro settlement was so affected by this first steamboat that the settlement changed its name from Fort Miro to Monroe in honor of the boat and the president the boat was named after, then President, James Monroe. By 1820 Monroe was incorporated as a city.

1.2.2 Prosperous Era

Transportation continued to shape Monroe’s history. In 1854, the first trains came through the area. Prosperity in Monroe continued as the area became a lumber processing center. Then in 1916, with the opening of the nearby Monroe Oil and Gas Field, natural gas became its famed resource. In fact, in the 1920’s Monroe was thought to have the World’s largest natural gas field. By the 1930’s, the City was able to attract a number of manufacturing and industrial enterprises, due to its location on the banks of the Ouachita River and access to important railroad, air and bus routes.

1.2.3 Notable Beginnings

As the City flourished, it also played a role in the early beginnings of two major companies. In 1894 Joseph Biedenharn, who lived in Monroe for most of his adult life, became the first to bottle Coca-Cola, sending the product to new heights. In 1928, a group of Monroe’s business men bought Huff Daland Dusters, a then crop dusting company, and renamed it “Delta Air Service”. The airline remained in Monroe until 1941 when it became a major airline and moved its headquarters to Atlanta. These entrepreneurs highlight the ingenuity of the people of Monroe as well as the City’s rich history.



The corner of South Grand Street, once the financial center of the City. The break in the street wall is where the Farmers and Merchants Bank once stood.

The City is also noted for its role in World War II. In 1942, the Selman Field Army-Air Force Navigation School was opened in Monroe. This school was the only complete navigation training station in the nation during WWII. The school graduated 15,000 navigators, more than 1,500 of whom lost their lives in combat.²

1.2.4 Vibrant Downtown Life

By the 1950’s, Monroe had developed into a major area of commerce with several distinct areas. One was the financial center at Grand Street and another was a retail center at DeSiard Street. Banks such as the Central Bank and the Farmers and Merchants Bank were located along Grand Street. Along DeSiard Street were retail establishments such as Woolworth’s, Dress, W.T. Grant, Morgan and Lindsay, TG&Y, Sears, J. C. Penney, Montgomery Ward and the Palace. As described in the book *Fading Textures*, “It was an excellent shopping district, offering everything a mid-century shopper could desire.”³



The Penn Hotel, an early 20th century hotel that housed celebrities who visited Monroe in the 1960’s.

² <http://www.ammla.net/about.html>



The Monroe Comprehensive Plan

Another account from Louisiana State Guide-Writers Program in 1941 says, “Monroe is often host to state-wide and sectional conventions, its excellent hotel accommodations, varied recreational facilities, and interesting industrial plants contributing to its popularity.”⁴

1.2.5 Progress in the City

Changes in the structure of the City began to occur in 1935 when U.S. Route 80 was moved north of the City to Louisville Avenue and another bridge was added to cross the Ouachita River. Eventually businesses moved to Louisville Avenue, extending the commercial structure of the City. With suburbanization and the coming of Interstate 20, the City was further expanded and the Monroe downtown was left with gaps in the street façade and abandoned buildings.

Other major changes in the City included urban renewal projects between World War II and the 1970’s, which attempted to revitalize the City. These efforts included the widening of DeSiard Street and the removing of buildings for additional parking.

During this period, new buildings such as the Monroe Civic Center were constructed to improve opportunities in the City. In addition, several historic buildings were preserved including the Isaiah Garrett Law Office, which is now used as a recreated mid-19th century law office museum operated by the Monroe Town Committee of the National Society of the Colonial Dames of America. Nevertheless, the City’s downtown streetscape deteriorated as downtown buildings were neglected.

1.2.6 Today’s City

While some treasures of the past have been lost such as the Paramount Theater on DeSiard Street, efforts have been made to preserve and reuse other architecturally or culturally significant buildings. Monroe has 21 buildings and two districts listed on the National Historic Register of Places. Historic preservation efforts have been made for several historic register buildings. For example, in 1989 the Ouachita Parish High School, built in 1924, was transformed into the Ouachita Grand Plaza, a senior citizens housing development. The project was a collaborative effort that included the city’s CDBG and general funds, HUD and the Monroe Housing Authority. Another example is the Pargoud Plantation Home in which community investment has been instrumental in its preservation.

Other efforts underway in 2007-2008 include several buildings that are in the process of redevelopment such as: the Penn Hotel, the Vantage Building, Wayne Williamson’s Willstaff Office Building on Desiard, Central Bank to Chase, the former Palace Department Store and other historic buildings of Monroe. As the City continues to transform, a continued effort is necessary to preserve the City’s heritage.

1.3 Planning for the Future –The Comprehensive Plan

The Comprehensive Plan for the City of Monroe comes at an auspicious time in the city’s history and development. There is much at stake as the city struggles to overcome obstacles and take advantage of opportunities. The plan is central to the success of this effort. The comprehensive plan provides a snapshot of the city at the present moment in the context of the historical development of the community. This information has been used to help craft a vision of a preferred future. As a

³ Lee Estes. *Fading Textures*. p. 139.

⁴ Ken Purcell. *Tales Along the Ouachita*. 56.



result of goal, objectives and policies have been developed to guide the coordinated and orderly future development of the city. The purpose of the Comprehensive Plan is to:

- Document local characteristics and trends regarding resident population composition, land use, the natural environment, economic development and service provision;
- Provide a benchmark for evaluating the compatibility of individual development proposals with the long range development objectives of the community;
- Reveal future service needs and explore the potential for regional cooperation, including land acquisition and the construction of public improvements;
- Serve as a comprehensive source of current information that can be used by the City in its efforts to secure state and federal funding and marketing the area to potential developers;
- Provide leverage for obtaining state and federal funding;
- Promote open space conservation designed to preserve the rural heritage of the community and enhance the overall quality of life;
- Attract potential developers to the City through the identification of community goals and objectives for the next 20 years;
- Lay the foundation for future cooperative efforts between the City of Monroe, the Parish and the neighboring communities.

1.3.1 Implementing the Plan

The adoption of the Comprehensive Plan is a commitment to a coordinated vision for the future. The Plan's success is measured through committed use by elected officials, municipal employees and residents.

- Elected officials will use the plan to learn about their residents' vision of the community's future and adopt local codes and ordinances to support those goals. The Plan's extensive analyses and policy statements provide both background information and leverage as elected officials negotiate inter-governmental agreements or dedicate financial and administrative support for identified Plan objectives.
- Zoning and planning boards will measure the desirability of development applications by their conformity with plan goals and objectives. In addition, they should adopt policies and procedures that actively assist those projects that comply with Plan's goals and objectives to discourage those projects that fail to honor the community's vision. Working closely with developers, local Boards will target investment to projects that promote plan objectives, reduce the need for excessive variance hearings and create detrimental development patterns.
- Municipal employees will use the plan when interpreting legislative mandates, making administrative decisions, enforcing development related codes and prioritizing work efforts. Employees will understand the vision set out by the elected officials to meet the goals of the people; municipal staff will have a greater buy-in to these goals through every day decisions that are made based on the plan.
- Finally, local residents will use the plan as a reference when making residential location choices, evaluating the effectiveness of local government, lobbying for financial or legislative support and when choosing political representatives. They will use the policy to help guide the city and enhance its quality of life. This comprehensive plan illustrates to all residents of the City the vision set out for the officials they have elected to maintain their quality of life.

The Comprehensive Plan clearly reveals the vision for the City of Monroe and, therefore, sets the stage for future growth in the City.



The Plan represents the collaborative effort of City staff and officials Comprehensive Plan Steering Committee and residents. The Plan is a collection of inventory and policies prepared to guide the City over the next 10 to 20 years. This section outlines the tasks completed in preparation of the Comprehensive Plan.

Steering Committee Meetings

A series of meetings were held with the Comprehensive Plan Steering Committee. The Committee consisted of elected and appointed City officials and citizens. The Committee met periodically with the consultant to discuss and direct the preparation of the plan. The Committee reviewed documentation and mapping, provided contacts and helped determine representatives to participate in a series of focus group sessions. At the outset of the project, there was a visioning session held with the Committee to develop initial goals and objectives and to help define the future of the City of Monroe.

Inventory

A data collection process was completed for the Plan. The information contained in the Plan was supplemented by data from various governmental and private agencies, to help ensure the accuracy of the document. With the help of the various agencies, information was obtained regarding local laws and ordinances, land use, the environment, population, community services, housing, municipal services and economic development. The inventory represents a “snapshot” in time. Data collection commenced in the summer of 2007 and was complete by the end of the year; information collected in the inventory reflects current conditions as of that time.

Focus Group Sessions & Telephone Interviews

A series of telephone interviews were conducted to obtain additional information. Many public and private sector individuals and organizations contributed data and assisted in updating previous Plan elements. There were five focus groups held on the topics of economic development, education, transportation, historic and cultural resources, housing, parks and recreation and youth interests.

Public Meetings/Hearings

Interactive public meetings were conducted in fall 2007 and spring 2008. The public was invited to hear about the plan and provide comments. These sessions helped provide the consultant and elected officials with valuable feedback on the plan and future of the City.

Community Survey

A random survey was distributed twice to City residents, homeowners and tenants. The survey was designed to determine the opinions of residents on a variety of topics, including community image, recreation, transportation, housing and community services.

Implementation

Goals, policies and actions were developed for the City of Monroe to help guide decisions over the next 20 years. The goals, policies and actions were developed based upon the visioning session, the results of the community survey and public and community input. These goals, objectives and policies are intended to lead to the overall improvement of the community and a better quality of life for all residents.



1.3.2 Plans Incorporated By Reference

There are numerous land use and development regulations already in place in the City of Monroe. This Comprehensive Plan is not intended to replace them, but rather incorporates them. The City's land use and development regulations should be updated and revised to reflect the vision of the future expressed by the Comprehensive Plan.

The documents incorporated into the Comprehensive Plan by reference are numerous and include the zoning and subdivision regulations. Also incorporated by reference throughout the Plan and the process are the following:

- City of Monroe Zoning Ordinance (1960)
- Consolidated Plan 2005-2009
- Creating Excellence in Economic Development: A Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy for the Monroe, Louisiana Region. (March 2007)
- Downtown Monroe Streetscape Development Plan (October 2007)
- Downtown Monroe Traffic & Parking Study (June 2003)
- Economic Development in Monroe, Louisiana, a project conducted by North Delta Regional Planning and Development to identify commercial and industrial sites in south Monroe. (2007/2008).
- I-20 Tax Increment Corridor Survey (December 1996)
- Monroe Downtown Action Agenda 2000
- Monroe Metropolitan Transportation Plan Update, (January 2005)
- Monroe Regional Airport Master Plan Update – Preliminary Draft (January 2003)
- Monroe, Louisiana Revitalization of the Downtown Core and the Ouachita Riverfront
- Ouachita Parish Louisiana Strategic Plan: Building a Community Vision Together, Recovery Action Plan (2001)
- Revitalization for the Southside District (2003)
- Southside Collaborative Neighborhood Revitalization Plan, New Light Economic Empowerment Corporation (NLEEC) (2007-2008)
- Southside Economic Development Plan (June 2003)