

3.0 The Future

3.1 Designing the Future

In creating the Opportunities Plan and subsequently the Future Land Use Plan for Monroe, there are three critical factors to consider. First, the existing development patterns must be acknowledged and accommodated. Second, the likely direction of development must be anticipated based upon the current zoning and patterns of settlement and investment. The third critical factor is an assessment of opportunities and constraints – the constraints posed by the realities of the current situation and the opportunities the current situation presents.

Another set of considerations that go into developing a Future Land Use Plan is the wants, needs and preferences of the residents of the City. A Future Land Use Plan for Monroe should contribute to a high quality of life that is sustainable over time so that people will want to live, work and raise their families there. It must be sustainable so that they can continue to live there in peace and prosperity.

3.2 Opportunities Plan

The Opportunities Plan is a graphic representation of some of the projects that could be developed in the City. It differs from the Future Land Use Plan in that it is a conceptual, graphic representation of an approach to the City's future. It should guide the development of the Future Land Use Plan, and it also conceptually can guide the hands of the City's leaders, present and future.

The Opportunities Plan depicted in Figure 3-1, below, responds to the current development pattern in Monroe and foresees solutions to physical shortcomings and problems. These can be larger-scale issues that need to be addressed on a regional scale. The priorities for Monroe expressed in the Opportunities Plan are economic development, downtown and neighborhood revitalization, education and waterfront access and enjoyment.

Land (and water) uses featured in the Opportunities Plan include:

- Ports – Both the air and water ports are central to Monroe's future. The water port, under development in 2007, is a central feature of the future of Monroe and West Monroe as cooperating and collaborating communities and to the Ouachita River as a unifying and not divisive factor. The airport, under redevelopment in 2008 and beyond, has important ties to Monroe's past, as a part of its culture with Selman Field's legacy and the founding of Delta Airlines in Monroe. The Aviation and Military Museum, which had a grand re-opening in 2007, is essential to the culture and self-image of Monroe and Selman Field and is also a potentially important generator of economic activity.



The Monroe Comprehensive Plan

- Industrial Development – Monroe has identified space that could be used for industrial development. A significant area north of the primary retail area and west of the airport has been identified as an opportunity area for industrial research and development. With ample access to the university, this area could serve as an incubator for university-related R&D, particularly as recommended by the Economic Development Strategy and the “Innovation Corridor” recommended by the University in its April 2007 study. The City also needs additional industrial park land; this could be located in the City and Parish east of US 165 and south of I-20.
- Parks and Greenways – The City’s open space system is connected and enhanced. The zoo is affirmed as an important feature of the south side of Monroe and another significant park, “Central Park” is added in the areas just west of the I-20, US165 interchange east of and including the old City Landfill. Linking the parks and destinations of Monroe and enhancing the street system is a system of trails. Two greenways, along the Ouachita River and Bayou Desiard enhance access and enjoyment of these waterways.
- Residential – Infill development is recommended throughout the City but particularly on the near-south side where removal of structures presents opportunity to rebuild and re-establish dense urban neighborhoods.
- Road System – The City’s road system is enhanced and connected by the Ring Road crossing the Ouachita below and west of the zoo and west of the general vicinity of Fink’s Hideaway north of the confluence of Bayou DeSiard and the Ouachita.
- Marinas – Marinas could serve the boating needs of Monroe’s residents and visitors. A downtown marina could serve transient boaters, giving locals and visitors a place to arrive by boat as well as a stop for tour boats and other vessels. A second potential is a marina in the area formerly called the Forsythe Boat Dock. A marina existing and accessed just inside the City at the river and Bayou DeSiard could be expanded and improved.
- Commercial and retail services – Primary retail, including malls stores, big box retail, auto dealers and chain stores of all kinds are foreseen to continue to expand in the existing retail core anchored by Pecanland Mall and outparcels. This development is potentially expanding to the south of I-20 and should be contained in this corridor. Commercial mixed-use including less intense retail and commercial as well as some associated residential development should be encouraged along the entire US165 corridor (Martin Luther King Jr., Boulevard).
- Downtown – A detail of the downtown shows the African American Museum as one of the focal points. In 2008, plans were being made for this community resource to move out of downtown. At the same time, the Children’s Museum is eyeing a location in Forsythe Park. It is hoped that downtown would be the location of choice for museums to create a critical mass of attractions downtown for the museums’ and the downtown’s benefit.

The Opportunities Plan graphic, on the following page, also depicts two conceptual lines. The first is the “redefined municipal boundary” and the second a “greenway trail.” Both the municipal boundary and the greenway are concepts designed to show Monroe can be unified with its neighbors in the physical realm and as unified regional economic and community development partners.



The municipal boundary indicates the area within which the City of Monroe has the largest influence. Within this area, through the years, much of the land – but not all – has been annexed into the city. Developing a more regional approach to planning throughout the Parish and recognizing the influence of the city beyond its corporate boundary within this redefined area can help to achieve goals such as the development of more industrial areas and break down barriers between communities.

The greenway trail shows the benefit of unifying Monroe and its region through a sustainable system of access. The greenway anticipates the planned fourth crossing of the Ouachita presumed in mid-2008 to be in the vicinity of Finks Hideaway, and perhaps even a fifth crossing uniting the south side of the city to the west to support continued future residential and industrial expansion. This is a long term objective as there is no action anticipated until 2015 or beyond. Funding is not secured for the estimated \$320 million fourth crossing.

3.3 Graphic Concepts

The graphic in Figure 3-2, above, shows “before” pictures of a series of graphic concepts illustrating the implementation of the Opportunities Plan to support the goals of economic development, downtown and neighborhood revitalization, education and waterfront access and enjoyment. For many of these concepts, a visual “before and after” format showing the concepts was developed. They illustrate the transformations that could take place in Monroe with the implementation of the Opportunities Plan. The concepts show specific locations, but many could be implemented throughout the city. It is important to remember that these are conceptual, but also that they show a very tangible future for Monroe. These projects are:

- Gateway Arteries – DeSiard Street Streetscape
- Riverfront Village
- University Village – Community Coop Center
- University Residential Life
- Fort Miro Interpretive Area
- Active Riverfront
- Waterfront Greenway
- Riverfront Boardwalk
- Martin Luther King Gateway – University Avenue Gateway
- Downtown/University Corridor Gateway
- Neighborhood Residential Infill and Rear Yard Walkway



3.3.1 Gateway Arteries– DeSiard Street Streetscape

Connecting the downtown to the University, the DeSiard streetscape transforms the street into a comfortable and convivial atmosphere for walkers, bicyclists, drivers and transit riders. The mix of uses including residential, retail and commercial transform DeSiard into a lively, 24-hour corridor. Similarly, South Second Street would be developed as the gateway artery from the zoo to downtown.

The in-fill development pictured is DeSiard Street, and it and the South Second Street Streetscape would be evocative of the indigenous architecture. The traffic volume –two lanes in each direction – is preserved, befitting a main artery, but the sidewalks safely accommodate pedestrians and lane widths are adequate to accommodate bicyclists. These projects would provide economic development benefits because they offer additional commercial space for retailers and office uses; they offer additional housing, some or all of which could accommodate low-to-moderate incomes families and individuals; and they improve the visual character of the city, which is intangible but increases the overall ability to attract investment.

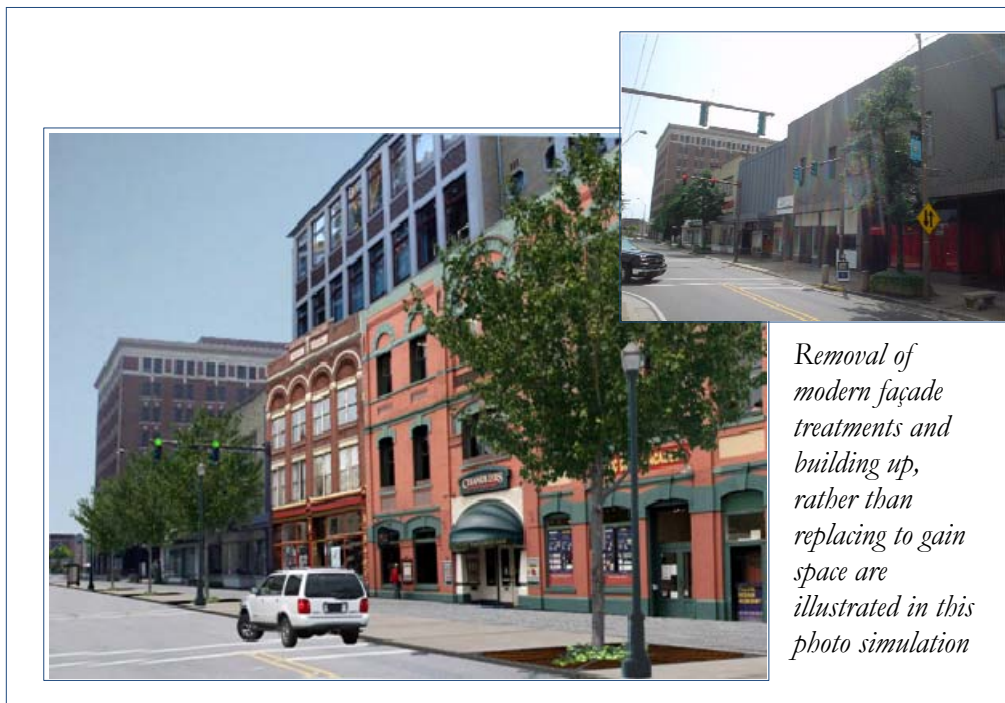
3.3.2 Riverfront Village & Community Cooperative Center

The Riverfront Village has education, culture and arts at its core, fully integrated with Monroe’s lifelong learning theme all in the context of an active downtown waterfront. Within a designated cultural district the Riverfront Village features galleries, shops and restaurants at street level and student, non-traditional artists’ studios and loft spaces above. Within the district, the City can implement the state’s tax incentive program for arts and culture enacted in 2007, providing incentives for artists to live and work there.



Riverfront Village area as it appears today, left; concept, below

Nearby, a community cooperative could be established to house educational and community facilities for all levels and sectors of the community. It should embrace all local and regional educational institutions including the Monroe City and Ouachita Parish schools; ULM, Louisiana Technical College, a Louisiana Community and Technical College system member; Louisiana Technical University and Grambling University.



Removal of modern façade treatments and building up, rather than replacing to gain space are illustrated in this photo simulation



While updating and modernizing historic structures can be difficult, from a downtown revitalization standpoint, the investment in Monroe’s downtown architectural gems would be better than demolishing them to build new, modern office, meeting and classroom buildings. One solution to this problem could be to expand by building upward, as shown in the accompanying photo simulation. Often, 1950s and 60s façade treatments can be removed to reveal the original historic façade intact.

By improving the public realm with street trees and sidewalks as well as by improving the economic development climate by providing tax incentives, the city can show it is ripe for private investment and for establishment of new traditional downtown arts and cultural uses.

Establishing a major educational hub downtown will also improve the economic climate. Students and faculty will come and go from the center on an on-going basis, creating all-important foot traffic for merchants and increasing the perception of safety in the downtown for everyone.

3.3.3 Fort Miro Museum & Interpretive Center

Transformation of the Natural History Museum on the ULM Campus has already begun and linking it to a major downtown natural, heritage and cultural hub downtown at a Fort Miro Museum will add to the understanding and cachet of the region’s rich resources. The collections housed at the university have vast potential for the interpretation of the region’s natural and cultural history and to provide critically needed linkages to two of the most important pre-history human settlements in the nation: Watson Brake and Poverty Point.

The Fort Miro Museum and Interpretive Center is a project that is being worked on by a local group that is also interested in obtaining the designation of a stretch of the Ouachita River from Jonesville to Sterlington as a National Heritage Area based upon the unique natural and cultural history of the area and on its pre-history and prehistoric resources.

Parking lot adjacent to the Parish Courthouse, left, transformed into a museum/ visitor center, below; is one possible location for a Fort Miro Museum.





The Museum and Interpretive Center could fulfill the role of visitor's center and central point of information for the city's museums, including the Biedenharn, Masur, African American Museum, Children's Museum, the city's historic districts and properties, Aviation and Military Museum as well as the ULM collections, Black Bayou Lake, proposed Ouachita River National Heritage Area, Indian Mounds Driving Tour and Bienville Trace Scenic Byway.

A Civic Streetscape should be developed to connect the Monroe Convention and Civic Center and City Hall into downtown to Grand Street and the Ouachita Parish Courthouse. The route, following Wood Street, runs by the Federal Court House and St. Francis Medical Center. The Civic Streetscape provides a formal and ceremonial linkage of three levels of government and increases understanding and wayfinding.

The Civic Streetscape also leads to the Fort Miro Museum & Interpretive Center and the old Clerk of the Courts office, believed to be the oldest standing building in Monroe. At the eastern end of the Civic Streetscape, a new Market Square can be incorporated, providing a central place to savor the agricultural products of Northeast Louisiana. To accommodate these projects, parking will need to be provided elsewhere.

These projects, along with all of the downtown-revitalization projects represent ideas that have a range of implementers, from the public sector working on the streets, river access and public amenities including trails, to the private sector working on the Fort Miro project with potential support from other destinations, artists and galleries in the arts district and educational institutions in the Community Cooperative Center. Together, these projects can create the important "critical mass" that will bring people back to the downtown and support the projects that are already underway such as the renovation of the Penn Hotel and the Palace Department Store on DeSiard Street.

3.3.4 Active Riverfront

Enhancing access to the Ouachita River for recreation and entertainment is a major piece of downtown and community revitalization. The riverfront access recommendations for Monroe include active access for an entertainment district, boat tours and a water taxi, a retail boardwalk and passive access for quiet and contemplative enjoyment.

Marinas for permanent and docking should be developed on the river as well. The active riverfront would be developed inside the floodway and so the US Army Corps of Engineers would need to be involved.

In addition to a riverside dock space, semi-permanent kiosks can be developed to allow for small retail and refreshment operations. Bright banners and flags, buskers and food stands will add to the naturally magnetic quality of the water, drawing crowds of residents and visitors on nice days. Tour boats can offer natural and historic interpretive trips, brunch, dinner and entertainment cruises. Water taxis can ferry people between riverfront attractions on both sides.



Small replica river boats can take passengers on tours in this photo simulation; water taxis could also operate here.



3.3.5 Riverfront Boardwalk

In the built environment in downtown along the Ouachita River a riverfront boardwalk could reconnect the downtown with the river. The buildings’ main point of access is on the west or land side. Developing a boardwalk will help draw people out to the riverfront to enjoy the view and at the same time provide access to retail establishments for people using the riverfront trail and greenway system. Outdoor seating and selling space with a view of the water will be attractive to visitors and residents.

Photo simulation shows the current location of the Children’s Museum “reimagined” as a riverfront amenity





The purpose of the riverfront boardwalk is to provide access to river views in an attractive atmosphere using existing buildings. The riverfront boardwalk is located on the existing floodwall.

3.3.6 Waterfront Greenway

A waterfront greenway would connect to the waterfront boardwalk to the north, connecting downtown with the Garden District, Forsythe Park and the rest of the proposed citywide greenway and trail system. Located on top of the existing levee, the trail is already an informal local pathway. The waterfront greenway concept includes improving the trail, amenities such as street furniture and landscaping. The purpose of the waterfront greenway is to provide an attractive amenity for passive enjoyment of the Ouachita River, to connect the proposed citywide greenway and trail system for citywide access and to promote healthy lifestyles and alternatives to automobile use.



Waterfront greenway concept, right, could be developed on the existing levee

3.3.7 Urban Greenway

South of the downtown connecting the river with the neighborhoods on the city’s south side, the urban greenway is another element of the citywide greenway and trail system. Pictured in this concept is a currently underused freeway overpass.

Throughout the trail and greenway system, trees enhance the urban forest and tot lots – play structures for small children – provide play opportunities close to neighborhoods. These amenities can be provided throughout the greenway and trail system.

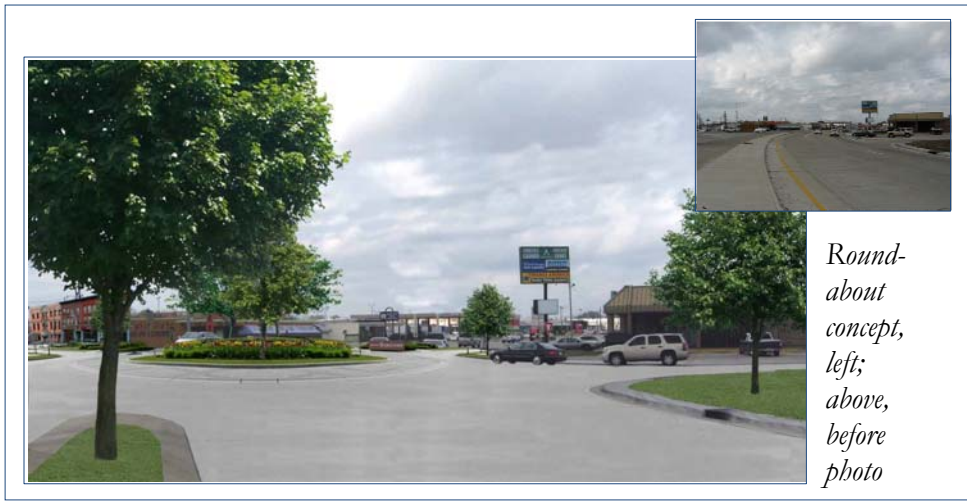
The purpose of the urban greenway is to provide access from the city’s neighborhoods to the downtown and river, to encourage healthy lifestyles, to improve the character and quality of life for residents and visitors and to provide alternatives to automobile use.



3.3.8 “University Avenue” Gateway

Martin Luther King Jr. Drive can become an important gateway to the City from I-20 with the University of Louisiana at Monroe and Bayou DeSiard at the north and the Louisiana Purchase Gardens and Zoo, Winnsboro Road and the neighborhoods to the south.

Within the right-of-way between the highway and service road, a trail can be developed as part of the citywide trail and greenway system. This development would provide a safe place for residents and bicyclists and can help encourage smaller-scale businesses to establish themselves along the service roads on either side of the highway. This concept is transferrable to other areas of the city where sufficient right of way is present to develop multi-use trails





3.3.9 Downtown University Corridor Gateway

Just to the west of Martin Luther King Drive where it meets DeSiard a roundabout is recommended. It would serve the intersection of DeSiard, Louisville, Sterlington Road and Powell Avenue.

The purpose of the roundabout would be to facilitate the flow of traffic so that vehicles can move through the intersection with more efficiency.

In addition to relieving congestion in this important gateway intersection, the project could help to bring the streetscape back to a smaller and more understandable scale making it safer for pedestrians and drivers. Decreasing the intensity of the intersection and making it more pedestrian friendly could encourage the establishment of small businesses.



Trail on Martin Luther King Drive concept, right; before

3.3.10 University Residential Area

To further establish the university as the major educational and cultural hub for northeast Louisiana, a University Residential area can be developed. This could be a university-based retirement community on the example of that developed by Kendal Corp. and others on and near college campuses over the past 20 years and also taking full advantage of the Encore College concept as well as Elder Hostel. The University Residential area should be located in an area adjacent to the University for ease of access by senior citizens. In 2008 there were several tracts of land that could be assembled for this purpose. Working with regional partners, Monroe submitted an application to become a designated retirement community. It was not identified for designation and a new submission application for Monroe alone is under discussion. However, it is the state’s policy to cultivate Louisiana as a retirement haven for senior citizens who want to enjoy the relaxed lifestyle and nice weather that can be had there. In 2006, the state published “Retire Strategic Action Plan”. In this light, the city may want to revisit this issue.



3.3.11 Neighborhood Infill

Throughout the south side of the city, there are opportunities to strengthen neighborhoods through urban design, to improve access for pedestrians and bicyclists and to provide neighborhood amenities such as play sets. In places where houses have been removed the lots may be unsuitable for new home development because they are too small, neighboring homeowners may be interested in them and the city could abandon them to these owners. These lots can also be used for access to the extensive rear yard alley system that exists on the south side of the city.

The alley system, which needs to be maintained because it serves as a utility right of way, can be improved for pedestrian access. This trail system is important because it fulfills the goal of providing safe pedestrian access even on streets too narrow for on-street walkways. Even as the city works with homeowners to install culverts and enclose the front yard drainage system in these neighborhoods, the streets still probably will not accommodate sidewalks unless homeowners give up significant amounts of the yard they reclaimed.



Concept graphic, right, shows rear yard access trails, lights and landscaping make the area inviting, compared with the before photo, above





The graphic representation above shows how the trail system could be developed in a typical block. Where houses are not present mid-block, the trail has been extended through to the street. Adjacent to the trail on the right side, a play structure has been placed. The purpose of neighborhood infill is to identify suitable lots for development of new homes and to replace homes that may be substantially dilapidated or unsafe. In instances where the lots are too small for development, they can be abandoned to the adjacent owners and also used by the city for the trail system concept.

3.4 Implementing the Vision

Implementing the vision that the community has defined through the comprehensive planning process should continue to engage the entire community. Implementing the vision should energize the community and galvanize it around the priorities of economic development, downtown revitalization, education and waterfront access and enjoyment.

The implementation strategy for the Comprehensive Plan is organized in a way that is straightforward, useful and comprehensive as the plan itself. The implementation matrix is guided by the five goal statements for the Comprehensive Plan as well as all of the policy statements. There are 70 recommended actions in the Implementation Matrix intended to guide the development of the character of the city over the next 20 years. The recommendations ranging from items for immediate attention and those for which implementation will take place over the entire term of the Plan to those for longer-term consideration. It is anticipated that new actions for implementation will be developed during on-going plan update to replace those that have been successfully implemented.

The 70 recommendations to implement the Plan resulted from the plan process including the inventory and analysis phase and the public input program. As the process evolved, the goals, objectives and policies were developed. The policies, as the “lens” through which the proposals that come before the city are evaluated, are also the driving force behind the recommendations. The recommendations fall into several categories:

Bricks and mortar – Some recommendations, like those described in the narrative and graphics preceding this section are “bricks and mortar.” All of these appear in the Implementation Matrix that follows.

Pending projects – Other recommendations reinforce projects and efforts that are already underway and sharpen their focus. For example, Recommendation Number 10: “Prioritize wireless computer access development for the south side of the city to bridge the ‘digital divide’ and continuing throughout the city.” In mid-2008, wireless access was available at the airport and the downtown network web was being built. Recommendation number 10 fulfills the priority of education and is a partner to another recommendation that will, if implemented, help make computers available at no cost in the at-need community increasing access and ability in new technologies.



Studies – Some of the recommendations advise additional study before action is taken. Monroe has a legacy of careful planning and has understood the need for careful analysis, for example the marketing study done in 2007 as a blueprint for regional economic development which results in recommendation number 32: “Support efforts to fund and implement the Marketing Plan with regional partners and seek to address key quality-of-life issues that restrain Monroe’s success.” New study initiatives recommended include number 29 which reflected a need strongly voiced during the public input process: “Prepare a site and market analysis and marketing strategy for drug stores, pharmacies and groceries in the south end of the City.”

Grassroots initiatives – Some of the recommendations require the community to come together and organize itself around implementation. An example of this is the above-referenced project to make computers widely available in the community. Recommendation 16 will engage a wide spectrum of the community including the education community, but also community volunteers: “Implement a community computer recycling program to gather donated computers, initiate a training program in computer reconditioning and distribute the reconditioned computers in the at-need community at no cost with leadership from the private sector.”

Recommendation seven would involve the preparation of a checklist to ensure that proposals meet the City’s zoning and planning standards and are consistent with the plan. The list would be attached to the proposals and ordinances coming before City Council, Planning Commission and Board of Adjustment.

Recommendation number two promotes a defined process for implementation of the Comprehensive Plan. The implementation of the Comprehensive Plan should be coordinated and supervised by the Planning Commission. It would operate as the hub or center of the network of implementation. To guide the implementation, the implementation matrix that follows presents all 70 recommendations. Each recommendation is assigned an implementer and a time frame, including “ongoing,” for those items that are or will be part of everyday implementation for Monroe; short term, for things that should be initiated right away; medium term for those initiative that should be addressed in the five- to 10-year timeframe; and long term which could take the entire 20-year planning time horizon or beyond. The recommendations also include an “evidence of progress” to guide getting started.

The Planning Commission can engage city departments, volunteer city boards, community groups and the public in a process of identifying implementation strategies and specific tasks. An annual report out to the community through the mayor’s *State of the City* address and other vehicles such as mailings included with city utility bills and newsletters should keep Comprehensive Plan topics in the public eye. Other strategies to raise awareness of the plan and involvement in its implementation include directing department heads to include plan-related tasks in their annual plans and holding a plan-related event each year for community members and groups to review the past year’s accomplishments and commit to new assignments for the coming year.

The implementation matrix follows.