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Ruston, Louisiana
Planning for Economic & Fiscal Health
Report and Suggested Next Steps
USDA Rural Development Rural Community Development Initiative (RCDI)

To: Ronny Walker, Mayor
Kristi Lumpkin, Economic Development Administrator

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Executive Summary

Pursuant to our technical assistance award with the City of Ruston, this Memorandum constitutes Smart Growth America's final report summarizing the recent *Planning for Economic and Fiscal Health* workshop, and suggesting possible Next Steps the city could take to craft a vision for future development of the focus areas addressed during the workshop.

John Robert Smith, Chris Zimmerman, and Emily Schweninger—all representing Smart Growth America (SGA)—met with local leaders and residents on September 17-18, 2019 to provide assistance via the *Planning for Economic and Fiscal Health* tool, supported by a grant SGA received under USDA Rural Development's Rural Community Development Initiative (RCDI) program. Under the program, SGA also conducted and delivered a *Hotspot Analysis* to Ruston identifying the most promising locations for development in the city. While results of this analysis are woven into our recommendations below, refer to appendix C for the results of the analysis.

Following productive interviews and discussions with various stakeholders — including residents, advocates, city and local agency representatives, business owners and elected officials — the following Next Steps are recommended:

1. **Create an advisory and implementation committee including the interests present at the workshop, to implement these action items.**
2. **Foster land uses that create fiscally sustainable development patterns.**
3. **Audit current land use policies and zoning regulations.**
4. **Revisit existing master plan.**
5. **Develop a cohesive plan for the integrated use of legacy buildings and historic structures in downtown Ruston.**

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.**
7. **Focus on placemaking and streetscapes in the city center to make it a destination where people want to visit and linger.**
8. **Create a marketing and branding campaign for downtown Ruston including ongoing place management.**
9. **Strengthen partnership with the universities so students can make Ruston their own place, and entice them to stay in the area after graduation.**
10. **Work on cohesion between downtown and Interstate 20.**
11. **Adopt a Complete Streets policy and implementation strategy.**

Need for assistance

The *Planning for Economic and Fiscal Health workshop* and the accompanying *Hotspot Analysis* that Ruston received from Smart Growth America was extremely timely for the community and region. The city is grappling with a number of key decisions regarding its future development patterns that will have a lasting impact on both its overall economic opportunity as well as the city's long-term fiscal sustainability. Ruston also recently endured a tornado strike that cut diagonally through its center from southwest to northeast.

Ruston has a relatively walk and bike friendly downtown that centers around an east-west rail corridor and a park on the site of the city's former train depot.

Ruston is home to Louisiana Technical University, and is near Grambling State University (Grambling). The city recently completed a multi-sport complex on its southeast side, near the Northern Louisiana Medical Center (Medical Center). Louisiana Tech and Grambling have combined enrollments over 17,000 students. The sports complex hosts city and regional events in baseball, softball, tennis, soccer, football, and other events.

The community has some critical decisions in the near future including how to rebuild following the recent tornado, and whether to focus future growth in the downtown or annex unincorporated areas.

A goal of the workshop was to help Ruston think about how to leverage the exciting potential for redevelopment within its borders, particularly the asset that Ruston already has in its historic downtown. Pursuing smart growth offers the community an opportunity to work together to create an economic future that is more sustainable, fiscally healthy, and economically diverse. The SGA team was excited to see the interest in and passion for the community from the diverse group of individuals present at the workshop representing a variety of stakeholder groups.

Review of SGA's Visit to Ruston

SGA's technical assistance visit occurred over two full days, September 17-18, 2019. The visit included the following components:

Component 1: A walking and driving tour of major points of interest in Ruston and

Grambling. Sites visited included:
- o Downtown
- o Farmers' Market
- o Diesel Plant
- o Ruston Annex Apartments
- o Louisiana Tech Campus
- o Tornado Impacted Neighborhoods
- o Ruston Sports Complex
- o Northern Louisiana Medical Center
- o Tarbutton Interchange
- o Grambling State University

Component 2: Conduct interviews with invited stakeholders, each lasting about 45 minutes. The following stakeholder groups were represented:
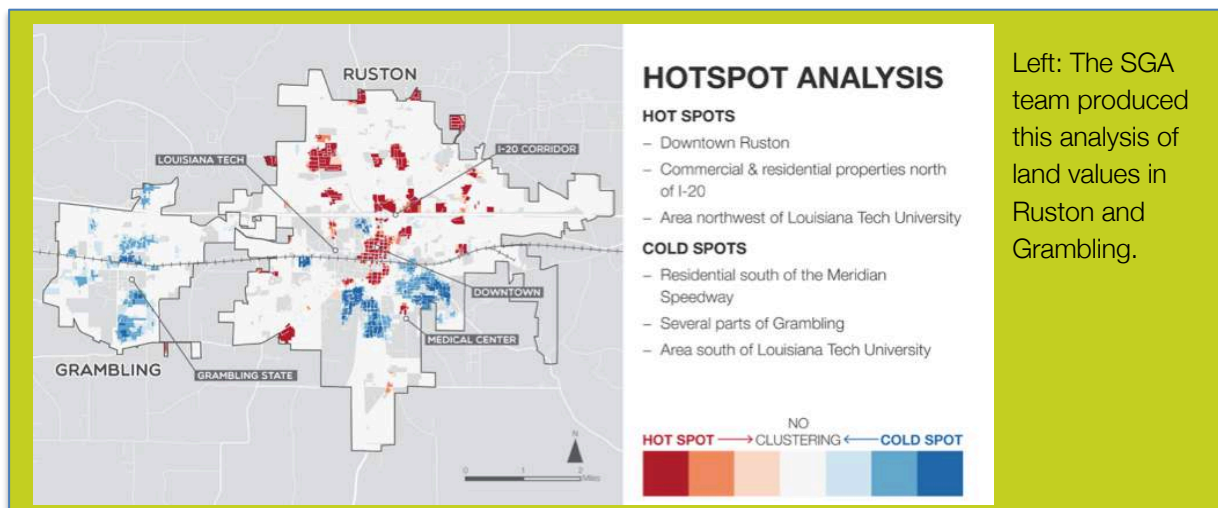- o Finance
- o Nonprofit and faith organizations
- o Downtown
- o Restaurants
- o Education
- o Healthcare

The interviews provided the SGA team with additional perspectives on Ruston's economic and fiscal health, expanding the voices beyond those in the room at the next day's workshop.

During the interviews, the SGA team asked each group a series of questions that all began with, "If you had never been to Ruston, what place is quintessentially Ruston?" From there, the SGA team asked more specific follow-up questions based on each group's characteristics, and how the group was most likely to regularly interact with the city.

For the names of those interviewed, refer to appendix A.

Component 3: An evening presentation open to the public and local media.
The evening presentation, held in the Ruston Civic Center, provided an overview of emerging national demographic and economic trends at play across the American landscape. The SGA team examined the economic impact of 20th century suburban development patterns, discussing the trend of migration by both Baby Boomers and Millennials to vibrant city and town centers. The presentation considered the emergence of the Millennial generation as the predominant driver of economic demand and the workforce sought by today's job creators, emphasizing that generation's interest in walkable, bikeable, vibrantly social towns and cities. A longer discussion of these critical issues Ruston faces is included below.

Left: The SGA team produced this analysis of land values in Ruston and Grambling.

Recognizing that communities are now in a ferocious competition over creating a sense of place, former Meridian, Mississippi Mayor John Robert Smith presented his city's story of downtown revitalization and economic development through the renovation and celebration of historic structures.

Component 4: A day-long workshop open to invited stakeholders

The SGA team began with a review of the economic and demographic trends presented at the public presentation the previous evening. The presenters offered three overall goals for cities like Ruston looking to protect their economic and fiscal health over the long-term:

1. Focus development on "main street" and downtown areas
2. Avoid continued sprawl that isn't financially sustainable
3. Improve sense of place to entice highway travelers to enter town, spend money.

Next, the SGA team outlined the connection between community development patterns and local government expenditures and revenues. Suburban-sprawl style development at the edge of the community is expensive because it increases construction and maintenance costs for infrastructure (roadways, utilities, etc.), along with police and fire coverage. These added costs must be paid for through higher taxes or user fees and mean this type of development rarely pays for itself. On the other hand, "Main streets" and dense mixed-use areas create synergies that produce substantially higher revenues than commercial sprawl.

The SGA team also presented the results of SGA's hot spot analysis—a visualization of clusters of high- and low-value properties within Ruston and Grambling. The exercise identified the parts of the cities that are hot spots and cold spots. See the figure for these locations. For more information about the methodology and results of this analysis, refer to appendix C.

Following the main presentation by the SGA team, Mayor Walker spoke about the city, and the prosperous, healthy future he envisions for it.

The SGA team heard from various stakeholders that housing affordability is a challenge.

Community members said a lack of supply in Ruston's downtown, coupled with concerns about fire codes and water pressure has them concerned. Downtown Ruston's popularity with students and retirees puts further pressure on housing cost there and multiplies the mismatch between current market preferences and sprawl-based planning orthodoxy.

Ruston has a natural advantage in attracting young, talented workers. Louisiana Tech and Grambling students spend their formative years sampling the community and building ties to the area that may entice some to stay. Over time, retained graduates can grow the area population, and increase the pool of talent, making the city more attractive to employers, and the employers' presence will entice more students to the universities, in an upward cycle of prosperity. Many communities across the United States lack this built-in advantage. Realizing this natural advantage, stakeholders suggested molding Ruston into a proper "college town," and helping students travel between both the Louisiana Tech and Grambling campuses and downtown without depending on a car.

Community members also said Railroad Park is an opportunity to build a sense of place within Ruston's downtown. Ruston owes its existence to the railroad crossing it from east to west, and naturally orients toward the former passenger depot site that is now Railroad Park.

Stakeholders from the finance community identified opportunities for the community to undertake some basic branding.

The SGA team reminded workshop attendees that decisions we make today are for the next seven generations. While we may not live to see the fruits of our labor, our children and grandchildren will live with them.

The remainder of the workshop was devoted to small group discussions and presentations back to the larger group. The participants divided into six groups. The groups each received a large paper map of the city, and surrounding area along with an oversized worksheet for identifying goals for the city and how to achieve them.

The instructions for completing the worksheet are shown here.

On the worksheet, participants identified each action and a path for achieving it. They could also draw changes visually on their map.

For a list of participants at the workshop, refer to Appendix A and for a summary of the workshop discussions, see appendix B.

Note: The intent of these workshops is neither for Smart Growth America to create a plan nor bind the communities to any particular course of action, but to assist ongoing regional efforts to create a more vibrant, successful region, consistent with the goals of their envisioned plans.

Lessons from the workshop on the built environment and fiscal and economic health

Communities around the nation are always concerned about their fiscal and economic health. This is especially true of small towns and rural regions.
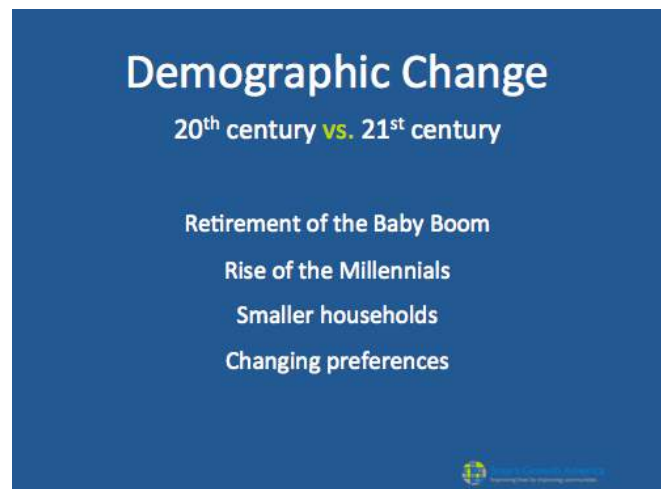
Fiscal health means a local government's bottom line: *Does the life cycle cost of a project's investment—upfront infrastructure, ongoing service provision and eventual repair and maintenance—cost more than what it produces in tax revenue?*

Economic health includes the general economic well-being of the community and its region: *How does new investment and development add to or detract from the creation of economic competitiveness, fiscal efficiency and sustainability, jobs, jobs access, retention of local talent, cultural identity and wealth?*

In approaching these questions for Ruston, as in any part of the country today, it is important to consider three broader trends:

First: Our nation's demographics are changing in a way that profoundly affects the housing market in large cities and rural areas alike.
Demographic trends are moving the housing market strongly away from conventional suburban housing.[1] That presents a significant opportunity for rural communities to compete for new growth. The two biggest demographic groups in the nation—retiring Baby Boomers and Millennials (18-39 year-olds) — both express strong preferences for a more walkable, urban/village lifestyle.

Demographic Change
20th century vs. 21st century

Retirement of the Baby Boom
Rise of the Millennials
Smaller households
Changing preferences

Data tells us that ten percent of all city-dwelling Americans would prefer to live in rural locales if those places are walkable, connected to the larger region and possess a strong sense of character

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[1] See "The Changing Shape of American Cities," Luke J. Juday, Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service, University of Virginia, March 2015.
"Demographic Reversal: Cities Thrive, Suburbs Sputter," William H. Frey, Brookings Institution, State of Metropolitan America Series, June 29, 2012.

and place. That represents a pool of 26 million potential transplants that the area could compete to attract. Indeed, forty percent of Millennials prefer to live in rural places, provided those places have a vibrant rural fabric. The vast majority of net new households formed have no children at home, and most of them are one- and two-person households, which are much more likely to prefer a walking lifestyle. These trends depart from those experienced in the latter half of the 20th century.

Second: The formula for economic growth is changing.

Business growth used to be driven by large corporations that operated in a fashion that was both private in ownership structure and linear in manufacturing and production. In the past, new research breakthroughs occurred in sealed research laboratories controlled by the companies that owned them. Manufacturing and other business processes occurred in assembly-line situations, with little interaction across or inside industries. These conditions led to communities that featured large, sealed-off campuses and tended to be linear in their arrangements.

The 21st Century Economy

- Creativity, knowledge, innovation
- Importance of networking, interaction
- Demand for skilled workers

"A region's most important source of competitive advantage is its workforce. . . it's the pool of talent that attract firms, particularly in the knowledge economy."
-- Ania Ania Wieckowski,
Harvard Business Review, May 2010

Today, business growth is driven by collaboration among many types of entities — private companies, research institutions, universities, and others — that must interact frequently and work together creatively. This trend requires cities and communities that encourage interaction and collaboration — the opposite of the older model described above. How communities are designed directly impacts their ability to create interactive and collaborative environments.

Most significantly, the innovation economy, as it is sometimes called, depends heavily on skilled workers. The companies that are driving innovation are pursuing highly educated talent, especially among Millennials. Increasingly, companies find it necessary to locate in places where their target workforce wants to live. Increasingly, that means walkable communities.

People on the move are looking to relocate to places with a high quality of life. In fact, they are willing to sacrifice salary for location. High quality of life is defined more and more by the character of the town center than by the size of a front yard or square footage of a home.

Every region, small or large, has ubiquitous "big box" retailers that are successful and generate major sales tax receipts. However, because they are ubiquitous and the same in every community, they do not create a shopping experience that is unique to a particular community. With online buying playing a bigger role for consumers, especially bargain hunters. Many are looking for a more authentic experience when they shop in person. This type of retail occurs most readily in downtowns, along walkable city blocks.

There is a distinctive niche in downtown Ruston for additional small specialty retail, restaurants, and coffee shops that will attract locals as well. These types of establishments should make no effort to compete with "big box" retailers. Rather, they should seek out niches that those other

generic stores in generic places cannot fill.

Major retailers that once developed in suburban locations only are now adopting a retail presence and footprint suitable for a storefront in a downtown. This is especially true in, for example, Franklin, TN. In addition, we are experiencing more online buying and some retailers are already imagining a downtown presence that is more cost effective because it has limited staff and no stock. Customers select their item locally and it is shipped to their home.

Consumers are demonstrating strong preferences for shopping locally at unique establishments that offer handcrafted or regional products. They prefer this experience to be a short distance from their homes and offices and within a comfortably walkable town center. This is bringing new value to traditional walkable main streets. Ruston is well suited to taking advantage of this shift in consumer choice.

Third: Sprawling development patterns are making it more difficult for local governments to balance their budgets.

Development patterns that sprawl outward from a town center require extensive investments in capital infrastructure and ongoing service delivery. Sprawling development requires more infrastructure to serve relatively few people and requires service providers such as firefighters and school buses to travel farther. More compact development patterns reduce both life-cycle infrastructure costs and operating costs.[2]

Development affects costs

Expenditures for infrastructure and services are more efficient in denser, better connected areas.

A 2013 study by Smart Growth America, *Building Better Budgets: A National Examination of the Fiscal Benefits of Smart Growth Development*[3], concluded that, compared to conventional suburban development, smart growth patterns can achieve savings of one-third or more in upfront infrastructure cost, and 10% annually in ongoing operating expenses. Smart growth development patterns can generate up to ten times more revenue on a per-acre basis.

More recently, SGA's *Core Values: Why American Companies are Moving Downtown*[4] examines the characteristics, motives, and preferences of companies that have either relocated, opened new offices, or expanded into walkable downtowns between 2010 and 2015. Smart Growth America partnered with global real estate advisors Cushman & Wakefield to identify nearly 500 companies that have made such a move in the past five years. Of those, Smart Growth America interviewed representatives from more than 40 companies to gain a better understanding of this emerging trend. These companies' new locations are in areas that are dramatically more walkable than previous sites. The average Walk Score of companies' previous locations was 52; the average

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[2] For more information, see: http://www.smartgrowthamerica.org/research/the-fiscal-implications-of-development-patterns/

[3] The full report can be downloaded at, http://www.smartgrowthamerica.org/building-better-budgets.

[4] The report is available for download from https://smartgrowthamerica.org/resources/core-values-why-american-companies-are-moving-downtown/

Walk Score of the new locations is 88. Similarly, Transit Scores grew from an average of 52 to 79 and Bike Scores bumped from an average of 66 to 78.

This trend is visible across the country, in big cities and small ones alike and should be a factor in the economic development strategy of all communities, including Ruston.

Note: *Not all of these trends will be completely relevant in every situation. Rural communities are more reliant on private automobile ownership, and transit is often less feasible in these situations. But it is important to bear all three in mind in considering the fiscal and economic health of any community.*

Takeaways from SGA's visit

Prior to the group discussions, the SGA team identified the following takeaways taking into account everything they heard and observed during their visit to Ruston.

- "Without the school [Louisiana Tech] there is no Ruston"

- "Focus on something for seniors [in housing]"

- "Focus on the fun part of college"

- "It's a safe community"

- "Ruston is beautiful, it's full of trees."

- "[Louisiana Tech] student body continues to grow – nowhere to put all of the students."

- There is a collaborative mindset within the city and broader community, this was intensified by the recent tornado damage.

Assets and Opportunities

- Main Street, the heart of the city

- Parks, outdoor recreation (though Rock Island Trail unfinished)

- Louisiana Tech and Grambling

- Strong collaborative atmosphere between Louisiana Tech and City of Ruston leadership.

- Regional Hospital

Obstacles/Disconnects

- Many talented young people leave after graduation

- Regulatory environment is opaque and viewed as development barrier

- Housing is expensive and in limited supply, especially downtown

- Historic building renovation costs

- Lacking in jobs for new graduates

- Water pressure seen as insufficient for multistory buildings.

Participant viewpoints

Appendix B summarizes each group's discussion, numbered in the order of verbal presentation at the workshop.

Actions for Success

Ruston has a lot of strengths. Its downtown core is walkable and compact. Historic buildings lend it a strong identity and scale. Proximity to Louisiana Tech and Grambling State provides youthful energy to the city and creates a potential pipeline for future residents and entrepreneurs. Keeping downtown as its heart, Ruston can create a community where new workers want to live and businesses thrive. Building cohesion between the downtown, Louisiana Tech, and I-20, the city can grow its center and feed off these successful nodes by connecting them to each other.

The remainder of this memo takes into account everything the SGA team saw and heard during our visit to Ruston including our observations from the walking and driving tour, the input received during the workshop, and breadth of work in other communities in similar circumstances.

We offer the following recommendations and associated action steps.

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

The workshop hosted by Smart Growth America was a great first step towards planning for Ruston's long-term economic and fiscal health. The city and region should be proud of its local assets, history, culture, and amenities. Those present at the workshop were enthusiastic about the future of the community in terms of its vision and opportunities – and may form the basis for an implementation committee if a suitable body does not already exist.

However Ruston chooses to implement it, building local leadership capacity is vital to move these next steps forward. Smart Growth America recommends establishing an implementation committee to take responsibility for the next steps recommendations that follow. It should be clear to others in the community, and the committee itself, where the committee derives its authority from and who it answers to.

This body should begin meeting as soon as possible. Members of the committee should come from, but not necessarily be limited to, the following sectors of the community – representing diverse stakeholders:

- Local governments – Ruston, Grambling, Lincoln Parish (both elected officials and staff)

- Major employers
- Small business owners
- Representatives of the arts community
- Ruston Chamber of Commerce
- Northern Louisiana Medical Center and other healthcare facilities
- Lincoln Parish School Board, private schools, Louisiana Tech, and Grambling State
- Other downtown representatives

The action items provided in the remainder of this document are intended to be comprehensive and to maximize the chances for success. It is important that this implementation body designate a chair responsible for the overall effort and a lead for each action item.

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

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

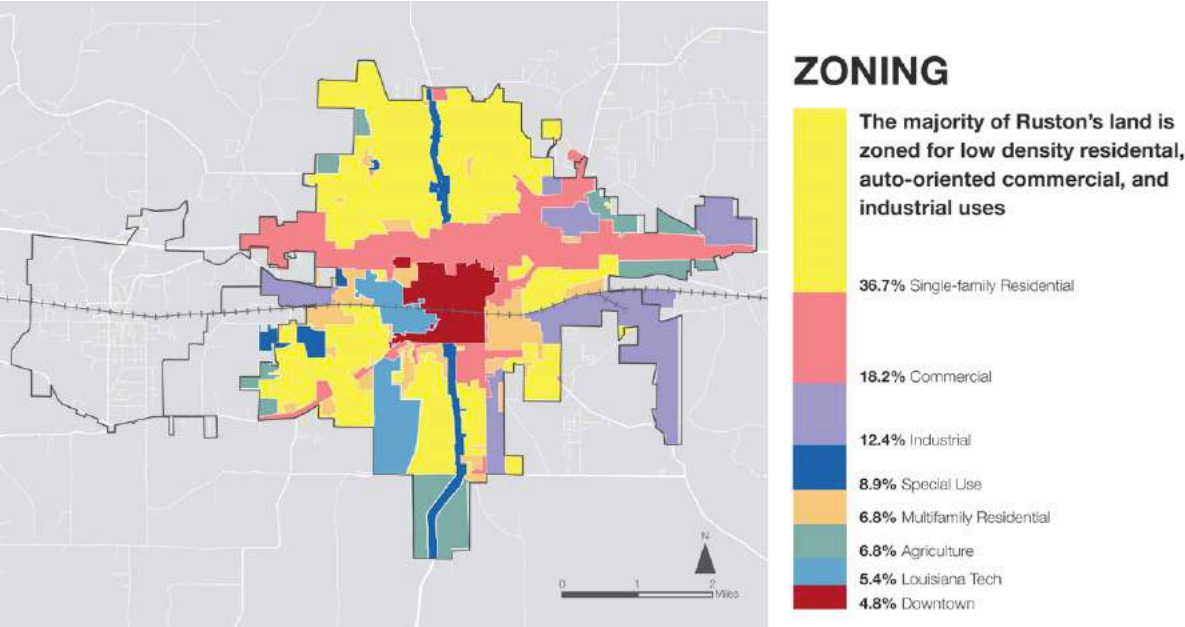## 2. Foster land uses that create fiscally sustainable development patterns.

In a small community, the temptation is to accept any development as a step forward, even if the project does not advance their established goals and vision—including an economically and fiscally sustainable future. Ruston's leaders are encouraged to put the long-term vision and goals for the city ahead of pursuing short-term financial gain comprised of uses incompatible with their long-term strategic vision for the community.

SGA's hotspot analysis shows properties in the downtown's hotspot were highly valuable – an average of $68,000 per acre. By contrast, the value per acre in the rest of Ruston is only $16,251 per acre. See Appendix C for more information on the hotspot analysis.

The hotspot analysis supports the conclusion that walkable downtown Ruston is the place to focus on housing, including workforce units that will entice college students and new hires at Ruston's major employers to live in the community. Further, the existing roadway and utility infrastructure to make these projects a success already exists in downtown. There are sufficient lot sizes and existing buildings ready to be rehabbed in downtown.

The SGA team recommends focusing the community's development on its existing assets in downtown, taking care to plan for the land uses for each as described above and in the accompanying figure. Any further development north of Interstate 20 will dilute city resources and divert resources from the city center, the most productive area in Ruston. This additional development would come at a cost, including new infrastructure such as utilities and police / fire coverage, which will be financially problematic for the future. Finally, this new development will

create a traffic problem, in the form of extra vehicle miles through the downtown rather than to the downtown.

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

To adequately serve the needs of Ruston's major population center as well as to provide the greatest economic impact and return on investment, the hospital should remain within a reasonable proximity to downtown. Many major hospitals, most often flagship hospitals, are located in urban areas near a downtown or other neighborhood. The Cleveland Clinic's main campus occupies several city blocks on the city's east side Fairfax neighborhood. The University of Michigan's main hospital is very near its nearby downtown and Amtrak train station.

This is not about sick, elderly, or disabled patients walking from home to the hospital to receive treatment. And we do not expect that hundreds[5] of doctors, nurses, and other hospital staff—as well as family members and friends visiting patients—will walk 25 minutes to Railway Coffee or other downtown amenities at lunchtime. Rather, once they finish their shift, hospital employees, who are already close to downtown, are more likely to stay there for dinner at Utility Brewing Co., a performance at Railroad Park, or a haircut at Rumo's Barber Shop. The same is true for those visiting patients. Taking advantage of nearby options for food, entertainment, and everyday errands is only possible with the hospital close to downtown.

Keeping the hospital in or adjacent to its current location—or moving it to another one in or around downtown—will be a boon for the city's economic prosperity over the longer term. The hospital is a place of treatment, a center of employment, and a convening space for other community activities. It throws off a halo to the surrounding area in terms of other employment and business. There is sufficient land surrounding the existing hospital or elsewhere in downtown to rebuild this

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[5] http://www.nlep.org/Regional-Data/Leading-Employers/Lincoln-Employers.aspx

important community facility at or near its current location.

Further, a hospital's reputation is based on the quality of care delivered and not its location. Receiving health care is not an impulse decision and, therefore, it is not critical to the facility's success (and patient outcomes) that it is visible from the highway like a car dealer or big box store.

In short, the hospital can serve as a driver of economic activity to downtown simply by remaining in a location that encourages hospital employees and visitors to take advantage of what downtown has to offer from time to time.

3. Revisit existing master plan.

Audit plan to find elements that are out of date or don't fit with city's long-term objectives
A city's master plan should outline its desired trajectory. Each part of it should further, even indirectly, the general future vision for the area. Sometimes, master plans become aggregations of old plans or compilations of various different plans for smaller areas that make up the whole city. In those instances, the master plan is no longer a single guiding vision for the area.

The implementation committee should examine the existing master plan to ensure it is a clear and cohesive document that furthers the city's future vision for itself.

If the city's goal is to concentrate development downtown and limit annexation, the master plan should reflect that. The implementation committee should identify portions of the plan that are inconsistent with that new direction for the city and recommend alternatives to those officials in charge of Ruston's next master plan. If necessary, the committee should recommend, and the city should enact, revisions to the master plan to reflect changes in the community's long-term development priorities.

Include elements that further city's goals for downtown
The implementation committee should focus on the master plan's existing direction for downtown. The committee should account for what is and isn't mentioned. To the extent Ruston wants housing, businesses, hotels, and other uses in the downtown, they should look for where those uses are mentioned in the plan. If they are absent, the committee could draft language to integrate those uses into the plan.

4. Audit current land use policies and zoning regulations.

Building codes: enforcements and incentives
Blighted stock discourages new investment. As the community courts new retail in the downtown, many entrepreneurs will avoid buying buildings that require hefty investments to make structures usable. A bad roof can negate a good deal.

The SGA team heard many residents and business owners with concerns about the city's regulatory environment for buildings. Concerns about use and fire safety rules were common. To allay these concerns, a comprehensive audit of the city's building code, fire code, and other regulations would be helpful.

A "demolition by neglect" ordinance has proven an effective tool for preventing blight. To address the fines levied under such an ordinance, building owners will either invest in their property to meet code requirements or sell it to another party who will do so. Fines will push them to invest into building maintenance to avoid expensive penalties. Conversely, reward programs encourage building owners to make a choice for their property compatible with the city's ordinances. The City of Meridian, Mississippi, for example, has established a process for handling reported code violations.[6]

However, both incentives and penalties should be utilized to ensure owners take care of their property and positively influence community development. Greenville, South Carolina is an example of a successful incentive program.

In 2001, Greenville created a Commercial Corridors Façade Improvement Program that helps commercial property owners improve the appearance of buildings and properties and eliminate blight. Painting, decorative awnings, window or door replacements, storefront enhancements, landscaping, irrigation, streetscaping, outdoor patios and decks, exterior wall lighting, decorative post lighting and architectural features are all eligible under the program. For expenses under $10,000, the city reimburses 50 percent and for additional expenses, up to 20 percent with a maximum award of $10,000.[7]

Noblesville, Indiana offers both tax abatements and a facade grant program, among other incentives, for investments in downtown.[8]

<u>Open vacant second story windows</u>
Consider opening second story windows that have been blocked even if the space behind them is vacant or used for storage. Dress the window exteriors to make there appear to be activity happening inside. This may include artwork and/or curtains.

Making the spaces behind upper windows appear occupied and alive creates an impression from the street that the area is more active than it really is. The look also adds architectural interest to each building individually.

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[6] https://www.meridianms.org/city-departments/community-development/code-enforcement-division/
[7] https://www.greenvillesc.gov/341/Facade-Improvement-Program
[8] http://www.choosenoblesville.com/incentives-grants/

Building with boarded upper windows
Source: Google Maps

Occupied windows, Thomas, WV
Source: Miles2Go/Michael Harding

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

Long-term Actions (12 months and longer)

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

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

Ruston must define its vision for downtown by creating a cohesive plan for the city center including plans for its historic buildings and how best to utilize existing open space. Every decision either adds to or subtracts from that vision.

This means that, as downtown renovations are planned, the community must not view each restoration project as merely a standalone building. Rather, these legacy structures collectively create a framework and context for both Ruston's history and its future that is worthy of celebration and community pride.

In the downtown core, Ruston should preserve historic buildings to the greatest extent possible -- at least the facade if the whole building isn't salvageable. Each legacy building contributes to the whole of downtown, is critical to the storytelling of Ruston's history, and provides unique spaces for adaptive reuse.

Ruston has a relatively large amount of land cleared in and near its downtown from the recent tornado. This open land is an opportunity for the community to infill spaces with walkable development that will set the tone for the existing parts of downtown and should resist conversion to surface parking lots.

Several key properties should be among the first to focus on:

Heard Freighthouse (sic) / Federal Building / Dixie Theatre
The Heard Freighthouse Food Truck Park is already a community asset, and gathering space. Its success shows that local leadership can create functioning spaces from public assets. However, the space has lots of potential. Specifically, the former railroad freighthouse at the site could be repurposed into a year-round hub for food events and a market for fresh food vendors and restaurants.

Crowd at DC Union Market
Source: Moki Media

Union Market in Washington, DC, is one place Ruston could draw inspiration from. The market is a hub for wholesale and retail food distribution that opened in the 1930's. More recently, it evolved into an area for fine dining and specialty foods and serves as a neighborhood hub. By congregating specialty food vendors in one place, each merchant benefits from the customers drawn in by the whole group.

Today, DC's Union Market leverages its 90-year history as a district where people come for food by offering quality food and other goods in a unique environment. The market is a hip and bustling space, "filled with local food vendors, restaurants, shops, and even a small movie theater."[9] The market is often filled on weekends and on weekday evenings, "packed with locals," according to a review in Conde Naste Traveler.

Ruston can strengthen its existing food truck gatherings by attracting permanent and visiting vendors, along with special events to the current Heard Freighthouse area. The space can also allow new entrepreneurs to test their concepts before larger investments in a standalone site, and partner with local culinary arts programs to help students gain experience and network with employers. The space would not compete directly with the nearby farmers' market, as this central market would be permanent and not necessarily have stalls for farmers since permanent merchants would occupy the site. However, when the farmers' market is operating there could be some synergies.

Heard Freighthouse food truck corral

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[9] https://www.cntraveler.com/shops/washington-d-c/union-market

The city-owned former Old Post Office, later Federal Building, at 201 Vienna St. is an example of Ruston smartly working to repurpose its existing spaces into future hubs of activity. The Building was constructed between 1906 and 1909, it functioned as a post office from 1909 to 1961.[10] It was converted into a small federal office building and functioned in that role until the government donated it to the city and Lincoln Parish for use as an office building in 1992.[11] The city is currently seeking approval to repurpose the building as an art gallery because the initial transfer terms from the federal government restricted the building to office use.

In Grand Rapids, Michigan, a former federal building and courthouse transitioned to becoming the city's art museum after the US District Court moved out in 1972. In 2013, a local university converted the building into the home of its art and design school.[12]

The Dixie Theatre opened in 1928 as the New Astor Theatre. Over several ownership and name changes, the building has potential to be a regional center for the performing arts. Operating since 2006 as the Dixie Center for the Arts, the theater hosts a variety of events ranging from community theater shows to professional networking mixers.

Other communities have renovated historic theaters, many of them now home to robust performing arts spaces. Examples include:

Ritz Theatre in Sheffield, Alabama.
Source: Cinematreasures.org

- Talladega, Alabama: The Ritz Theatre, originally opened in 1937, completed a major renovation in the late 1990s, transforming it into the "the premiere performing arts center of East Central Alabama".[13]
- Sheffield, Alabama: The Ritz Theatre opened in 1928 as a silent movie house. In the 1980s, after being closed for more than 30 years, it was purchased by the Tennessee Valley Arts Association and reopened as a performing arts space. Activities today include classes and programming for all ages.[14]
- Williamsport, Pennsylvania: The Community Arts Center (originally the Capitol Theatre) is another example of a renovated historic venue, successful through a community collaboration and vision.[15]

As part of the process, Ruston should reach out to these and other venues who have successfully renovated and reopened. Those involved may be able to provide valuable feedback on the process, including pitfalls to avoid.

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[10] http://www.lagenweb.org/lalincoln/fed-bld.htm

[11] https://www.apnews.com/1bb92a58d50f4809974b9ff402e44a8e

[12] https://mathisonarchitects.com/federal-building-to-ferris-building-renewal-and-reconnection/

[13] http://ritztalladega.com/history/

[14] https://www.tvaa.net/visit-the-ritz-theatre/theatre-history.html

[15] https://www.caclive.com/us/

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:
The street wall describes the "wall" created by buildings being lined up right against each other. It creates an impression that someone is in a dense, fully occupied place. By "missing teeth", the SGA team is referring to vacant properties or underutilized properties such as surface parking which could be redeveloped into a more productive land use. This will help make downtown into a more pedestrian-friendly area where people enjoy spending time. Ruston should aim for a continuous street wall of 4-6 blocks.
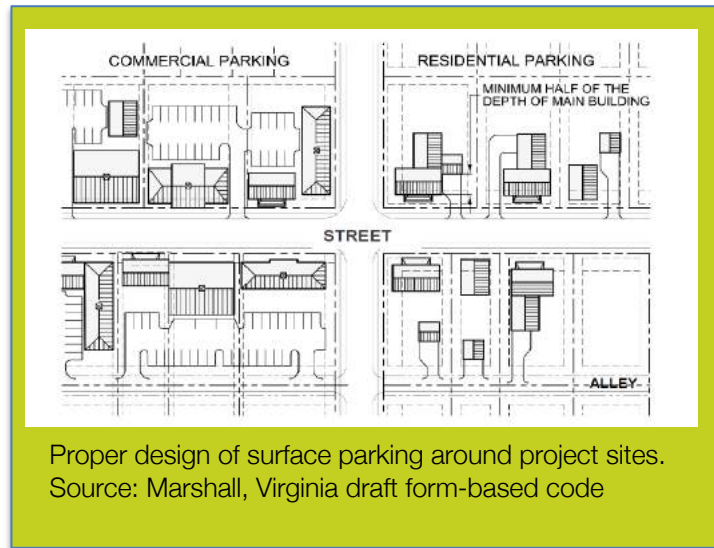

Site Design
Buildings – active spaces, which generate people – serve to engage and activate the street space. This is done by both creating an attractive street wall and through buildings' permeability (doors and windows). These techniques promote human contact and make passersby feel comfortable. The building itself should front the sidewalk and meet the block face.

When any new buildings are being planned or redeveloped downtown, special attention should be paid to how any included parking is designed. Parking can often be wrapped within or behind the building faces to help screen the parking. Feelings of welcome and comfort are lost if cars are in the way between the sidewalk and the building itself.

The SGA team recommends that parking be accessible from side streets or rear alleys to allow the major streets to remain attractive walking environments for pedestrians. This will maximize the best use of the site for those walking between various destinations.

The figure demonstrates the proper placement of surface parking around project sites.

Proper design of surface parking around project sites.
Source: Marshall, Virginia draft form-based code

Consider adopting a form-based code for downtown
To both facilitate new development and guide it to create the right building envelope, Ruston may wish to consider if a form-based code is right for downtown. A form-based code (FBC) is an alternative to the conventional zoning most localities adopted in the mid-20th century. It is intended to regulate development so as to achieve a desired form of the built environment, one that emphasizes walkability and the creation of appealing public spaces, in a mixed-use setting. This contrasts with conventional zoning, which emphasizes the separation of uses, and was developed largely to accommodate an automobile-centric development pattern.

One of the advantages of a FBC is to simplify the project approval process.
Because the community establishes the characteristics of acceptable and desirable development beforehand, application review can become somewhat routine, or at least simplified. Protracted negotiations among applicants, government, and community members can be avoided. This has benefits both for developers (concerned about the uncertainties of the entitlement process, and the associated costs that may be incurred) and for neighbors (concerned about the nature of the development that may occur next to them, and the impact on the neighborhood).
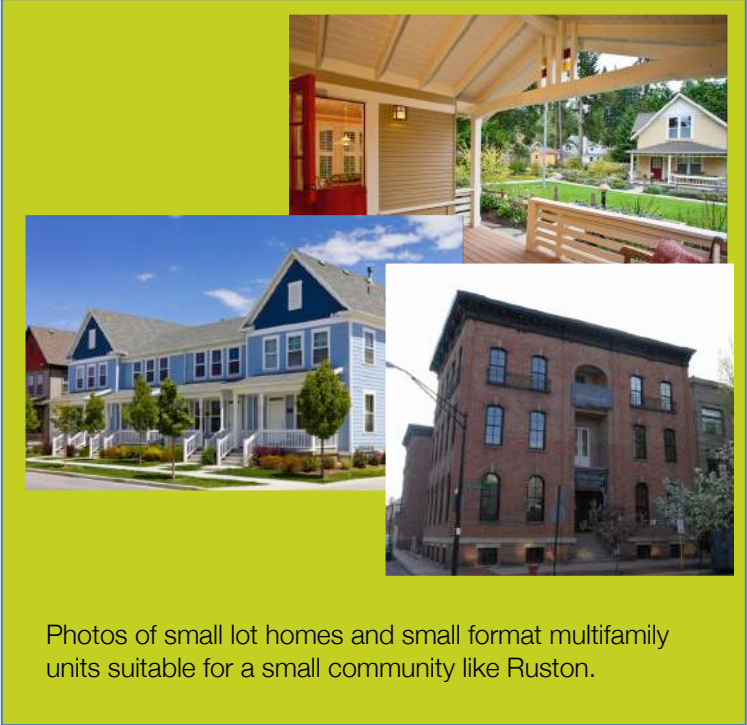
The potential benefits over time, in achieving a community's goals for development, do require significant "upfront" investment in a planning effort, including the time of municipal staff and citizens.

Refer to the Form-Based Code Institute (a program of Smart Growth America) resources page for more information on implementing FBCs.[16]

<u>Focus on small lot homes and small format multifamily units</u>
Traditional small lot homes and small format multifamily units are the right types of residential development to focus on around downtown. This will add some density and allow for housing choices while preserving the historic look and feel of downtown.

Photos of small lot homes and small format multifamily units suitable for a small community like Ruston.

These types of homes fit the character of downtown and the most neglected market segment.

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.

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.

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[16] https://formbasedcodes.org/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.

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.**

We heard many older people describe vivid memories of spending time shopping, watching movies, and doing other activities in downtown Ruston when they were younger. Many younger residents can easily identify aspects of downtown that make Ruston feel like home. First and foremost, downtown Ruston should remain that heart of the city with which so many residents of the city identify. Like the human body, Ruston requires a healthy heart to prosper.

While Ruston has major employers and activity centers outside the downtown, such as Louisiana Tech and the Northern Louisiana Medical Center, people working or studying at those places would likely enjoy stopping by Ruston's downtown at the end of their day or on days off. Downtown businesses, and the city's treasury would also benefit from strengthening downtown's position as a community-gathering place and shopping center.

Identify one or more "tactical" projects for downtown that are low or no cost to take the first steps. During the workshop, there was discussion about getting more students to stay in Ruston after graduation. Without getting into heavy lifts such as building more housing and attracting large, technically sophisticated employers, we heard some interviewees say they thought cultivating more pseudo-public spaces would help create an emotional attachment between students and the city. Also called, "third places," meaning the next place someone is likely to be after 1) home, and 2) work/school; these can be permanent businesses like coffee shops or diners, or recurring but temporary spaces like a sidewalk where food trucks gather. In an economy where much creative and technical work can be done remotely over wireless internet, people can spend a substantial amount of time at their favorite "third places." This time can help form a bond between the students and their city, increasing the desire to stay post-graduation.

To cultivate this, the city can encourage pop-up coffee shops or other unique businesses to experiment in empty storefronts. It can also organize times and space to corral food trucks in a central location at regular intervals (weekly, monthly…) in the downtown outside times when food trucks already gather at the freighthouse.

Simple projects such as painting crosswalks on city-owned streets, trimming shrubbery, and other clean up in downtown that can safely be done by members of the public can help bring the community together, engendering a sense of pride and common ownership in downtown.

Further, community events that create temporary gathering spaces in downtown, including closing off of roadways, can be another driver to help residents see downtown in a new light. Ruston already has accent lighting in the area around Railroad Park, creating a sense of place that sets the area apart from other parts of the city, especially at night. The city already hosts regular events downtown and in Railroad Park and smartly hosts events in coordination with Louisiana Tech home football games to leverage the regular influx of visitors. Each of these events can be a catalyst to bring people downtown, either during the event itself or afterwards for a meal.

Example of a stylized downtown street sign. Source: sojournsigns.ca

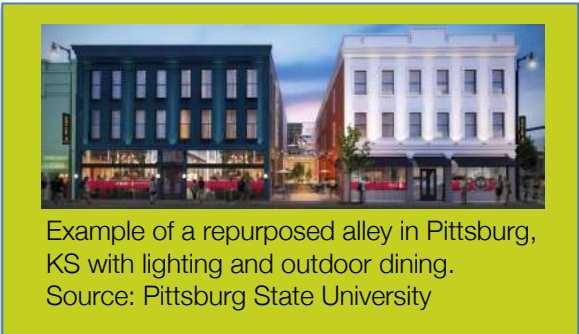### Add street name signage at intersections

The SGA team encourages Ruston to ensure that every intersection in downtown has the names of the cross streets clearly identified. While locals may instinctively know street names, visitors may not. This will further orient these visitors as to where they are, whether walking or driving, in relation to downtown's businesses and gathering spots. Again, this signage can follow a unique graphical theme.

Manage parking in downtown

Almost without exception, cities believe they have a shortage of parking. However, there appears to be underutilized parking within the greater downtown area. Managing parking means that Ruston should identify available downtown parking on city streets, behind buildings, and in surface parking lots. As noted above, providing trailblazing signage will ensure that drivers know about off street parking and how to get to it.

The city's off-street parking should have a common system of control and not be exclusive to any one particular destination. The goal is to encourage Ruston residents and visitors to park once, in parking that already exists off street, and complete all of their business in downtown without moving their vehicle. This step will require coordination with owners of existing parking lots to ensure that certain parking spaces aren't reserved solely for patrons of one business.

Finally, Ruston should identify the existing gaps in the street facade that can be used to connect off street parking to businesses that front the street.

Example of a repurposed alley in Pittsburg, KS with lighting and outdoor dining. Source: Pittsburg State University

Alley connections and other amenities to encourage outdoor dining

Restaurant patrons enjoy dining outside in nice weather. By bringing its alleys to life and allowing dining tables on the sidewalks where they are unobtrusive will encourage more people to try downtown's existing and new restaurants.

Alleys need not be used solely for parking. Ruston's existing alleys could easily be made

more engaging through additional lighting, outdoor dining, and cafe seating. This would make for engaging pockets of activity that, in particular, visitors will enjoy discovering. For reference, the development and public design in Pittsburg, KS and Springfield, MO provides a good example of what could be done with these spaces.

Sidewalk dining is another mechanism that attracts diners. A restaurant need only put a single table out on the sidewalk and passersby know the restaurant is open for business. This encourages them to sit down and have something to eat or drink.

Alley in Culpeper, Virginia with dining. Source: Culpeper Renaissance on Facebook

The SGA team heard that outdoor dining or patios may face some obstacles in downtown Ruston. We encourage the city to change its ordinances to allow for this type of use in a way that does not impact the use of sidewalks, alleys, or other rights of way. Examples of communities with outdoor dining ordinances include Alexandria, Virginia[17]; Covina, California[18]; and Winfield, Illinois.[19]

Outdoor dining in West Chester, Pennsylvania

Additional downtown lodging

A boutique hotel or a bed & breakfast within walking distance of downtown Ruston would serve as a boon to the city center. Combined with other enticement to visit downtown Ruston, new accommodations will encourage visitors to Ruston interested in exploring the city to stay overnight downtown. These visitors will eat in downtown's restaurants, purchase their morning coffee at one of downtown's locally owned coffeehouses, explore the retail establishments, and have a drink at a bar. There is likely a niche market for downtown hotel rooms with guaranteed events such as Louisiana Tech and Grambling football games, along with tournaments at the athletic complex. Filling one or two missing teeth with hotel(s) where guests will be extra likely to spend money at other downtown businesses should be a top priority, even if it's a small hotel.

A community event in Erwin, Tennessee Source: Johnson City Press

[17] https://www.alexandriava.gov/uploadedFiles/planning/outdoor_dining_ordinance.pdf
[18] https://www.codepublishing.com/CA/Covina/html/Covina17/Covina1757.html
[19] http://www.villageofwinfield.com/documentcenter/view/8042

Community gathering spaces and events
Railroad Park is flagship regional gathering space and community asset. If Louisiana Tech wins a national title in football, the parade should end at Railroad Park. Additional spaces of differing sizes for outdoor events, including music and arts, as well as for community and holiday celebrations will bring new people to downtown.

Ruston already has several community events of various types and sizes throughout the year. Gatherings in this space, another venue located easy walking distance from downtown businesses, or via temporary roadway closures are another way to bring Rustonians and visitors alike into downtown who will then patronize local businesses before or at the conclusion of the event.

Beyond special occasions, recurring events that attract people—such as a young professionals event on, for example, the third Tuesday of the month—are also great ways to bring people to downtown. During the workshop, the SGA team heard that the Convention and Visitors Bureau has been organizing some monthly events.

Other downtown amenities
Trash receptacles and additional seating throughout all of downtown, perhaps funded by the chamber of commerce, tax increment financing, community benefits district / business improvement district, local tourism tax revenues, or another entity, will be great assets. These amenities would beautify the area and encourage people to walk through the downtown by providing comfortable places to rest during their explorations.

Pursue traffic calming through downtown Ruston
The installation of traffic calming infrastructure—such as center islands and additional bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure—will further encourage drivers to naturally slow down while passing through downtown. Once visitors are already driving more slowly, this will increase the likelihood that they will consider stopping to explore. Passing and implementing a Complete Streets policy as described below will help Ruston continue to ensure the safety of pedestrians and bicyclists is included in future roadway projects.

Ruston should consider the sidewalks and city-owned streets not as an inviolate piece of infrastructure that can't be touched, but as an amenity that can be used in conjunction with private sector enterprise to vastly improve the ambiance of the entire downtown.

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.

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 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.[20]

Example of on-street parking temporarily repurposed as dining
Source: jsonline.com

- 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.

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.

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

<u>Create a branding and marketing campaign for downtown.</u>
A branding campaign specifically for downtown Ruston would help market the community and its unique identity to the outside world. This campaign should embody the unique features downtown Ruston has to offer both visitors and potential new residents. It can include components such as a unique logo, moniker (perhaps consistent with the city's moniker on its website: "Excellence Made Here". The city and all other partners should use the branding consistently for it to be most effective.

As an example, consider the Pepsi logo or another well-known corporate logo that does not

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[20] For more information, see http://archive.jsonline.com/business/two-east-side-parking-spaces-replaced-by-14-outdoor-dining-tables-b9982256z1-220860751.html/

require one to read the product name in order to recognize it.

The marketing campaign should focus around what specifically makes Ruston unique both within the region and beyond. The city, chamber of commerce, or another established community group within Ruston should run the campaign. This does not need to be a new entity; it can be incorporated into one of these other entities but it requires a dedicated staff member to pursue.

<u>Invest in marketing and trailblazing at and around the I-20 highway interchange to encourage travelers to visit downtown.</u>
Passing through a place (i.e. stopping for gas or a quick meal) is not the same as visiting the place. On an average day in 2017, more than 43,000 vehicles drove along I-20 through Ruston.[21] While most were on their way to and from destinations outside Ruston without stopping, some fraction of these drivers stopped for gas, food, or just to take a break from driving.

Ruston should make a major push to encourage those going past Ruston to somewhere else to drive the short distance to downtown Ruston. Since Trenton and Vienna streets are also parts of the US Highway system, Ruston should focus on slowing and enticing those through travelers to stop while passing through the downtown.

Two critical tools will help get these visitors into downtown. First, the city could consider partnering with some of the establishments at the highway interchange to provide cultural education about the area as people stop for fuel or food. The implementation committee proposed above should coordinate signage, social media, hotel flyers, radio spots, and other outreach. It is imperative to have these interests work in harmony or neither district is likely to succeed. Hotel rooms or even information counters at Louisiana Tech and the sports complex could provide information about amenities in downtown Ruston to visit—particularly any special events that occur during the year.

Once visitors make the decision to visit downtown, trailblazing from the highway in both directions via signage will encourage people to take full advantage of the businesses and other amenities when they get there.

There are currently no signs directing motorists to downtown Ruston and none that would encourage them to stop there for lunch or to browse downtown businesses. From a windshield on I-20, a motorist has no impression a walkable downtown exists south from exit 85. What a motorist does see are signs twice as tall as any nearby building for national chain gas stations, restaurants, and hotels. Ruston can and should alert motorists that its downtown exists, and give drivers a reason to stop by calling out activities like eating, shopping, or antiques as things available downtown. Specifically, the signage should call out important destinations and landmarks in the community that someone unfamiliar with the area should visit.

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[21] http://wwwapps.dotd.la.gov/engineering/tatv/

Highway exit sign in Concord, NH
Source: Concord Monitor

Highway exit sign for aquarium in Norwalk, CT
Source: TheHour.com

Market the multi-use trails

During the workshop, there was discussion of finishing the Rock Island trail. The SGA team would add that trails are important as part of a connected network, and it's important that any trail from outside the city connect with multiple street corridors to enable circulation into and within the city.

Trails can offer significant health benefits for existing residents. The city could promote their usage for walking, jogging, or biking as one part of a challenge to lose weight coordinated by city leaders.

Trails can be a key draw when marketing Ruston to potential new residents coming for jobs at Louisiana Tech, Northern Louisiana Medical Center, and other local employers.

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.

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

The SGA team heard Ruston already enjoys a strong partnership with Louisiana Tech and understands that the partnership flows from the close working relationship between the city and university leadership. Present city and university leadership can leverage their close partnership to create lasting benefits for the community, further the city's identity as a college town, and encourage students to stay in Ruston after graduation.

Connecting Louisiana Tech to downtown Ruston for those coming on foot, bike, or transit is already a recommendation and is a key part of drawing students into downtown more often and maybe even living downtown.

Additionally, the city could empower students as individuals or as part of formal organizations, to get involved in changing the city's streetscape and overall built environment. This would leverage some students' expertise in architecture, landscape architecture, and other disciplines. Allowing students to have a hand in designing Ruston's new look will increase students' perceived ownership of the city and encourage them to stay. It also will inject new, diverse design ideas and aesthetics to the city.

10. Work on cohesion between downtown and Interstate 20.

Ruston naturally enjoys close proximity to Interstate 20 and Louisiana Tech University. The city can strengthen its position by improving the visual and practical connection to those two assets and help draw people into downtown.

Create a corridor of arrival connecting Interstate 20 to downtown Ruston.
Shortly before arriving in downtown, a visual narrowing by an alley of trees, overhead signage or other mechanism will encourage drivers to slow down and pay attention to their surroundings before they get to downtown. Converting U.S. Route 167 from its twin one-way format along

Monument in Parsons, Kansas.
Source: Flickr user J. Stephen Conn

Arrival gateway in Council Bluffs, Iowa.
Source: Travel Iowa on Pinterest

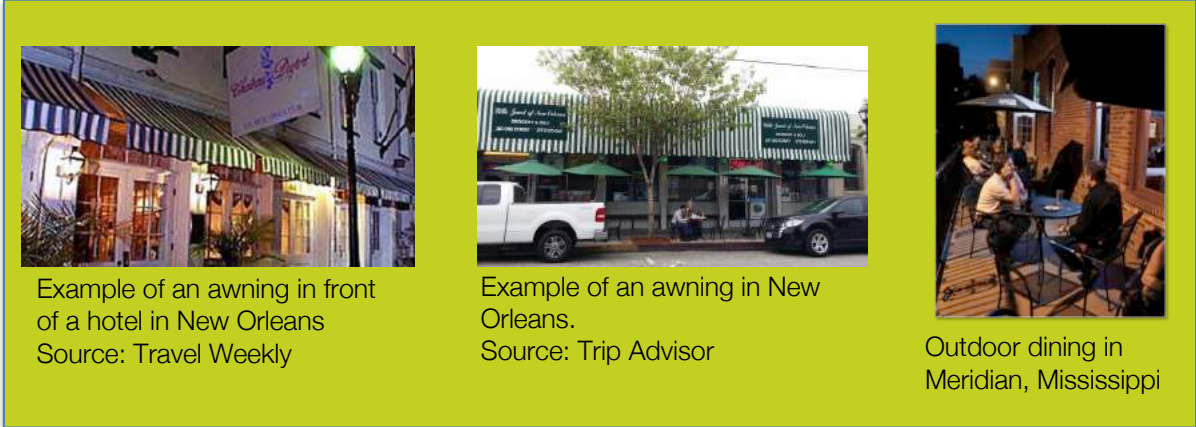Trenton and Vienna streets into twin two-way streets to slow traffic and improve safety.

At the entrance to downtown, a gateway monument like those shown in the photos will further heighten the sense of arrival. This artistic gateway should represent the culture and history of the area. It could be decided through a community design charrette, a competition, or by soliciting proposals from local or Louisiana artists. Ensure that an overhead monument is high enough to allow all vehicles to pass freely beneath it. This monument differs from a landscaped sign at the edge of the community.

Use building awnings for both shading and business signage
An alley of trees leads the visitor into downtown and the monument announces their entry into downtown. Once in downtown, because of limited space, a linear sequence of balconies and

awnings down Vienna and Trenton streets and their cross streets would provide a seamless protection from rain and hot sun. This will make walking in downtown more enjoyable, encouraging more browsing in stores, restaurant meals, and other activities.

Building awnings can not only provide this needed shading, but can also provide a mechanism for business signing if done well. We heard from some who were concerned that excess heat and sun would dampen outdoor events. Empowering building owners without awnings to erect awnings throughout the downtown would help make the walking and window-shopping experience better throughout the area by lowering sidewalk temperatures. Additionally, street trees can spread shade more broadly to the street, building facades, and surrounding sidewalk areas.

Example of an awning in front of a hotel in New Orleans
Source: Travel Weekly

Example of an awning in New Orleans.
Source: Trip Advisor

Outdoor dining in Meridian, Mississippi

Improve pedestrian infrastructure including lighting upgrades
Ruston and Louisiana Tech already have a master plan focusing on better connecting the university's campuses with each other and the city.[22] The SGA team supports the existence of this plan and its priorities. The city and Louisiana Tech should focus on implementing this plan, along with other improvements for non-car travel.

Ruston should ensure that all downtown streets and the corridors leading into downtown from I-20 and Louisiana Tech have useable sidewalks. Energy efficient LED lighting could be one way to ensure pedestrians and others feel comfortable walking around downtown in the evenings and create a consistent feeling of cohesion along the corridors connecting downtown with I-20 and Louisiana Tech. Aim for a consistent look for pedestrian-scale lighting throughout downtown and along the above corridors. Additionally, the east-west pedestrian path should be well lit, feel well maintained, and safe throughout the day and night. Meridian, Mississippi converted its street lighting and traffic signals to energy efficient LED fixtures saving $250,000 in electrical costs the first year. The city could find grant mechanisms for lighting upgrades or another funding mechanism that may be able to offer Ruston assistance with the conversion process, applying the savings to the cost of conversion. Ruston's municipal utility would enjoy direct savings from installing LED streetlights.

Add signage for both pedestrian wayfinding and trailblazing for drivers
Wayfinding presents a set of destination choices that quickly orient the reader to where they are and how to get where they are going. Trailblazing points to a specific destination and assumes the

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[22] https://www.ruston.org/downloads/monroe_street_corridor_project_final.pdf

user won't have the time to stop and read. Ruston needs both types of consistently designed signage leading people both to downtown and to specific destinations within it. These types of destinations may include, but certainly not be limited to, the Dixie Theatre, Freighthouse food truck and market area, City Hall, Railroad Park, the medical center, and other amenities. Additionally, the east-west path south of the railroad should have signage directing potential users what destinations it serves, and how far those destinations are.

For drivers, this additional signage should make them aware that they are heading towards downtown and encourage them to slow down and observe their surroundings as they drive through it. The goal is to entice them to stop for a visit to experience the local amenities that make downtown Ruston more than just a place to pass through. Signage directing drivers to existing off street parking located behind buildings will also encourage them to stop and explore downtown. The SGA team heard that effective wayfinding signage is in the area's strategic plan.

Once drivers are out of their cars, additional markers providing a self-guided walking tour of downtown telling its history and describing regional culture will encourage visitors to further explore downtown as they move from one marker to the next. The new markers will also help the city recognize and celebrate its local history.

All of the above signage and wayfinding should be designed around a consistent graphical theme as part of a larger branding effort for downtown described later.

Examples of trailblazing signs: Left and Left Center: wayfinding signs. Center Right: downtown walking map. Right: historical marker.
Sources, left to right: Seymour Tribune; Pinterest user Cloud Gehshan; Town of Leesburg, VA; Historical Marker Database/William Fischer

11. Adopt a Complete Streets policy and implementation strategy.

Ruston should adopt a Complete Streets policy to ensure that all future street design efforts consider the needs of pedestrians, bicyclists, transit users, and persons with disabilities. Ruston should then work with Lincoln Parish, and the LaDOTD to adopt their own policies and to implement Complete Streets throughout the region. Adopting a Complete Streets Policy demonstrates Ruston's commitment to establish, design, and implement transportation improvements, addressing and balancing the needs of citizens of all ages and abilities.

Refer to Appendix E for a list of helpful Complete Streets resources available online.

According to the National Complete Streets Coalition, an ideal Complete Streets policy:
1. Includes a vision for how and why the community wants to complete the street
2. Specifies that the term "all users" includes pedestrians, bicyclists and transit passengers of all ages and abilities, as well as trucks, buses and automobiles.
3. Applies to both new and retrofit projects, including design, planning, maintenance, and operations, for the entire right of way.
4. Makes any exceptions specific and sets a clear procedure that requires high-level approval of exceptions.
5. Encourages street connectivity and aims to create a comprehensive, integrated, connected network for all modes.
6. Is adoptable by all agencies to cover all roads.
7. Directs the use of the latest and best design criteria and guidelines while recognizing the need for flexibility in balancing user needs.
8. Directs that Complete Streets solutions will complement the context of the community.
9. Establishes performance standards with measurable outcomes.
10. Includes specific next steps for implementation of the policy

Taking a Complete Streets policy from paper into practice is not easy, but providing some momentum with specific implementation steps can help. Some policies establish a task force or commission to work toward policy implementation. There are four key steps for successful implementation:

1. Restructure procedures to accommodate all users on every project;
2. Develop new design policies and guides;
3. Offer workshops and other educational opportunities to transportation professionals, community leaders, and residents; and
4. Institute better ways to measure performance and collect data on how well the streets are serving all users. Each of these steps requires agencies to think in new ways and, in order to do so they must include a wider range of stakeholders in decision-making.

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:
  - <u>Who</u> 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
  - <u>When</u> 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

- ○ <u>What</u> 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.

Medium-and-Long-term Actions (6 months and longer)
- Incorporate Complete Streets policy into roadway and intersection redesigns as they occur.

Conclusion

As with all conceptual plans, implementation is the challenge. The key here is to engage the most influential and passionate individuals and partners in the community. The success or failure of implementation will rest in the efforts of the implementation committee as supported city leaders. While there are individual steps to implement in short, medium, and long timelines, the timeline for Ruston's overall improvement may exceed the tenure of individual committee members or local leaders. It has been our pleasure to work with the City of Ruston as we observe the unique opportunities before it. Ruston has a great downtown that it can leverage to attract visitors, while directing future investment to further improve this key asset to its full potential. The SGA team believes that if Ruston follows their recommendations, as well as the city's own vision, Ruston can grow into a thriving and fiscally sustainable community that sets an example for its peers to follow.

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