

## Young professionals roam city

Laura Bond, *Reporter*

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What is there for young adults to do around Ruston?

One local resident brought up this often-repeated question at a meeting of downtown merchants Tuesday. In the context of this conversation, business owners were trying to determine what age groups to target and what appealed to young professionals. As one woman pointed out, a lot of young adults move away from Ruston after they graduate from Louisiana Tech or even from high school. They move to Dallas, Shreveport or other cities in search of excitement, romance or stimulating career opportunities. Years later, some of them trickle back to Lincoln Parish where they feel like they can raise their children in a more family-oriented, lower-crime environment.

But before that day arrives, many young adults will look past our piney hills to other sites where they can fulfill their dreams, be it a challenging job or a life partner. As one woman noted, some people have to move off to bigger cities for a while to find husbands since "the only places to meet someone here are bars and churches."

That's not the first time I've heard that one. And I think it's about 70 percent true, although some can meet their significant others through friends, work or online.

I do believe change is coming to Ruston slowly. City officials appear to be aware that more needs to be done to make Ruston an attractive living space for young professionals. There are concentrated efforts to make the area more appealing to investors, so more businesses will plant their roots here and open up local job opportunities. These efforts can be tied to infrastructure changes in the city planning process, as well as the city's initiatives through Ruston 21 — the master plan for the future — to get current business owners' perspective on how to make the city more business-friendly.

Opportunities for entertainment and meeting new people appear to be expanding slowly as well.

One recent attraction is the implementation of First Fridays, where downtown merchants and others provide entertainment — be it through street performers, fashion shows or concerts — for anyone wandering the downtown streets on the first Friday evening each month. This night offers an alluring atmosphere for 20-somethings as well as college students. There was an antique car show one night people raced over to observe. Then there was the graffiti activity, where anyone was free to spray paint symbols and letters of their choice on the inside of one of the businesses.

As was pointed out at the meeting earlier this week, businesses in the downtown area are also staying open later, which gives young people a place to go and socialize in the evening.

With the renovation of the Dixie Center for the Arts, more evening entertainment is available, and band performances at area restaurants and sporting events give locals an excuse to mingle. Coffee shops are also a popular hangout spot for young adults, as are the region's parks.

Still, there is arguably much more that could be done to make the parish more appealing to young singles, as well as childless couples in search of entertainment. Could this city sustain an amusement park, large dance club or shopping mall? I don't know. Maybe the area just needs a few daring young adults to take the initiative and start activities or businesses that suit the tastes of a generation in search of action.

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