# MARKET STUDY

**FOR THE HISTORIC METHODIST CHURCH IN DOWNTOWN WEST MONROE, LA**

SITE REUSE PLAN & FEASIBILITY STUDY

## Public Funding Statement

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The former First United Methodist Church in downtown West Monroe holds significant potential for adaptive reuse that meets both market demand and community aspirations. This market study identifies a clear path forward by pairing local input with economic analysis, resulting in a focused vision for redevelopment that balances cultural, economic, and civic goals.

**TWO CONCEPTS EMERGED AS TOP PRIORITIES:**

- a live performance venue/event space and
- a food hall, restaurant, or speakeasy

Each reflects strong community support, with **over 70% of survey respondents favoring performance-based programming and expanded dining options**. Market data further underscores their viability, citing growth in local entertainment spending, sizable college-age and working-age populations, and unmet demand for nighttime dining and social spaces.

A hybrid model combining these uses would maximize the site's versatility and revenue potential. Proposed elements include:

- → A music and event venue in the sanctuary.
- → A speakeasy-style lounge with food service in the basement.
- → Pop-up retail and art spaces.
- → Outdoor features like a food truck court and artisan vendor corridor.
- → The adjacent parsonage could serve as an Airbnb or artist residency, contributing to a vibrant cultural campus.

This reuse strategy aligns with the city's downtown revitalization priorities and offers a sustainable way to activate a historic asset. With thoughtful design and the right partners, the former church can become a dynamic hub for arts, food, and community life in West Monroe.

# INTRODUCTION

## Project Background

The City of West Monroe, in partnership with Atlas Community Studios, is leading a feasibility study to support the revitalization of the historic former First United Methodist Church in downtown West Monroe. Funded by a grant from the Louisiana Office of Cultural Development, the study is focused on identifying a viable reuse strategy that honors the building's cultural significance while advancing local economic and community goals.

Key project components include:

- In-depth research and analysis of the site and the surrounding market areas
- Active community engagement, and
- A practical implementation strategy that outlines funding and operational pathways

The primary goals of this study are to:

- Identify a feasible redevelopment plan and possible partner(s).
- Elevate the role of the church as a cultural and economic anchor within the downtown district.

# Methodology

This study uses a mixed-methods research approach that combines quantitative analysis, community engagement, and priority planning documents to guide viable reuse options for the former church and inform a broader vision for downtown West Monroe.

**DATA SOURCES INCLUDED:**

Quantitative datasets from JobsEQ and ESRI, which provided detailed insights into **demographics, income levels, industry composition, and market behaviors** across 1, 3, and 15-mile market footprints.

**Primary research** into major regional economic drivers, such as the Meta Data Center and other catalytic developments influencing current and future workforce and consumer demand.

Review of the following key planning documents that are currently shaping investment priorities and land use policy in the downtown district:

- → Downtown West Monroe Master Plan (2019)
- → City of West Monroe Master Plan (2022)
- → Ouachita Parish Brownfields Revitalization Plan (2022)
- → Cottonport Historic District Guidelines + Incentives
- → Building and Zoning Guidelines
- → West Monroe City Code of Ordinances - Part 12

**Public engagement efforts, gathering qualitative data from:**

A **community-wide survey**
(101 responses)

Two **in-person visioning workshops**
(one morning session, one evening session)

Seven **one-on-one interviews**
with the property owner, local business owners, city and economic development leaders, and stakeholders engaged in the arts and entertainment landscape.

Online **stakeholder feedback** and public social media comments

The survey and workshops were open to the public and collected feedback from a wide range of ages and geographic areas. The findings were highly consistent across all platforms—survey, workshops, stakeholder interviews, and social media comments—indicating strong thematic saturation around key community priorities. This consistency suggests a high likelihood of broad community support for the ideas presented.

# Site Research

A thorough understanding of the building's layout, condition, and regulatory framework is essential to evaluating feasible reuse scenarios. Because the property is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and located within the Cottonport Historic District, any redevelopment must balance adaptive reuse goals with preservation requirements. These designations bring opportunities for historic tax credits and design incentives, but also introduce specific guidelines for alterations, materials, and treatments that must be factored into planning. The following section outlines key site characteristics, including physical layout, infrastructure conditions, zoning requirements, and preservation considerations that will shape what is possible and permissible for the site's reuse.

## SITE OVERVIEW AND BUILDING LAYOUT

The former church property sits on a 1.7-acre parcel in the heart of downtown West Monroe. The campus includes two primary structures: the original 1920 Colonial Revival church and a mid-century education annex. Together, these buildings offer significant square footage and multiple points of entry, providing flexibility for adaptive reuse.

## ZONING

The site is zoned B-3 General Business District under the City of West Monroe Code of Ordinances (Sec. 12-5016), which allows a wide array of retail, service, and cultural uses by right, including restaurants, event venues, galleries, museums, studios, and bed & breakfast accommodations.

- **Zoning District:** B-3 General Business
- **Permitted Uses:** Includes art galleries, museums, auditoriums, churches, restaurants (including drive-in), and mixed retail/services.
- **Uses Requiring Approval:** Any new or expanded use may require Planning Commission site plan review, depending on intensity and impact.
- **Historic Overlay:** Additional design review or approvals may be required under Cottonport Historic District guidelines and Main Street participation.
- **Parking:** No minimum off-street parking is required in B-3; shared or nearby public parking may be acceptable depending on use.

## INFRASTRUCTURE & UTILITY CAPACITY

According to the Downtown Streetscape Master Plan, infrastructure in the area is generally over 80 years old, with limited documentation on system capacity. While recent public investment has improved walkability, stormwater drainage, and ADA compliance in some areas, any food service, event, or performance use will likely trigger further utility and accessibility assessments.

- **Water/Sewer:** Condition and pressure flow should be verified for food-based or high-capacity public use.
- **Electric:** Above-ground systems may require upgrades to support AV equipment, lighting, or commercial kitchens.
- **Stormwater:** No flooding issues identified, but system capacity may be strained with increased impermeable surfaces.
- **Pedestrian Access:** ADA improvements are underway, but currently incomplete near some intersections.

## HISTORIC DESIGNATION & PRESERVATION REQUIREMENTS

The building is individually listed on the National Register of Historic Places and located within a designated Louisiana Cultural District. This status makes the property eligible for a 20% Federal Historic Tax Credit and a 20% State Commercial Historic Tax Credit, provided all work adheres to the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation.

- **Preservation Incentives:** Up to 40% combined tax credits available.
- **Restoration Tax Abatement (RTA):** Property tax freeze available for qualifying improvements, renewable for up to 10 years.
- **Design Guidelines:** Alterations must maintain historic integrity; features such as stained glass, woodwork, and the building's facade are considered character-defining and must be preserved.
- **Oversight:** Local design review may be triggered for exterior changes or signage as part of Main Street or Cultural District participation.

## ENVIRONMENTAL CONSIDERATIONS

A Phase I Environmental Site Assessment (ESA) has not yet been completed. Potential issues, such as asbestos and lead-based paint, may be present due to the structure's age. Early environmental due diligence will be necessary for any use involving public occupancy, food service, or building modifications.

**VISIBILITY AND ENTRY POINTS**
The property has frontage on both N 2nd Street and Wood Street and is visible from multiple angles, including from the rail line to the south.

**PEDESTRIAN CONNECTIVITY**
Walkable to downtown shops, services, and community spaces; sidewalk connectivity is in place along the primary frontage.

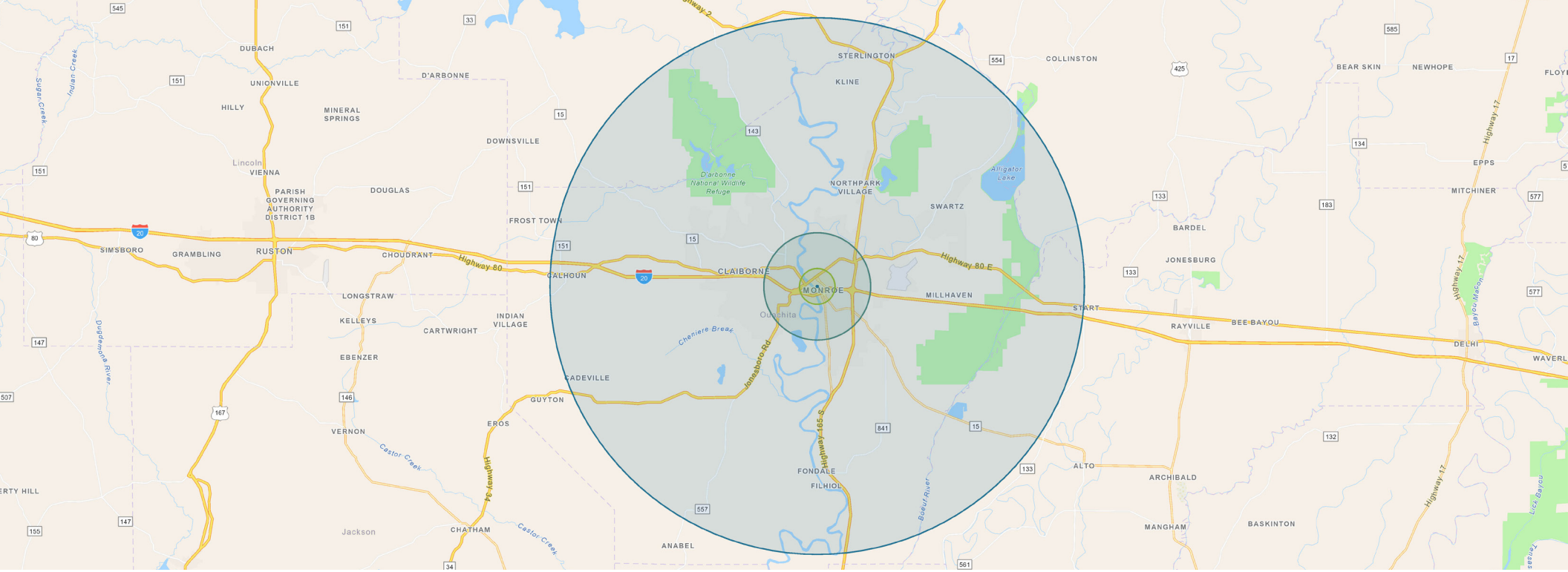
**POTENTIAL FOR PHASED DEVELOPMENT**
The scale and configuration of the adjacent parcels allow for flexible, phased reuse strategies that respond to market demand and community needs.

## ADJACENT LAND USE

The former First United Methodist Church is one of six contiguous parcels under common ownership, totaling approximately 2.7 acres. This consolidated ownership presents a rare and significant opportunity for coordinated reuse across multiple parcels, particularly given the site's location at the edge of downtown. The parcels include the former church, adjacent parking areas, open green space, and a vacant parsonage - each with potential to support complementary programming such as indoor and outdoor event space, food trucks, public art, or short-term lodging.

The aerial perspective illustrates the scale and configuration of the site in relation to nearby uses. Surrounding properties include small commercial operations, city-owned lots, and walkable access to downtown businesses and civic spaces like Alley Park. The site is also a short distance from the proposed passenger rail station location, positioning it well for future multimodal access.

This map illustrates current building uses and vacancies within a walkable radius of the former church site. It helps identify active business clusters, underutilized spaces, and potential complements with the reuse of the former church property.
Antiques
Boutiques
Food + Drink
Yellow = Services
Airbnb / Events
Residential
Personal Care / Salon / Spa
Gallery / Studio
Vacant
McDonald's
N Bliss
Louisiana Battery Warehouse
Fine Dining
JAC's Craft Smokehouse
Bath Planet
Northeast Louisiana Baptist Association
Cotton St
Pine St
Metro Narcotics Unit
West Monroe City Credit Union
Office of Motor Vehicles
Crosley Elementary School
N 3rd St
Arkla Computer
BHI Rental Properties
Seventh Square Coffee
Absolutely Cake
Lovabella Melange
Trapps
Cotton Hair Salon
School St
John Thomas Bed and Bath
United States Postal Service (USPS)
Family Promise Of Ouachita
Ouachita Valley Heritage Museum
Park St
S 1st St
S 2nd St
S Riverfront St
N Riverfront St
Proactive Medical Supplie
Louisiana Children's Museum
Revival Design & Consign
N Grand St
Ouachita River
3280




# Market Area Approach

To assess the potential reuse of the former First United Methodist Church and its impact on downtown West Monroe, we analyzed three concentric market areas:

**1-MILE RADIUS The immediate neighborhood and downtown core.** This includes residents, employees, and foot traffic within walking or short driving distance of the church. It captures those who are most likely to engage regularly, whether stopping by during a lunch break or walking to a community event in the evenings.

**3-MILE RADIUS The core of West Monroe and nearby Monroe neighborhoods.** This captures the people who are most likely to engage frequently, perhaps not daily, but several times a week for work, errands, dining, or recreation. It includes key anchor institutions and employment centers that shape daily activity patterns.

**15-MILE RADIUS The broader Ouachita Parish region.** This area includes more dispersed suburban and rural households. While residents in this zone are less likely to interact with downtown West Monroe daily, they represent a large pool of potential visitors and consumers who may engage occasionally for events, dining, shopping, and special experiences.

We use these nested market areas because they reflect the common patterns of movement around communities. Instead of treating downtown West Monroe as a standalone market, we recognize that it is:

- → A neighborhood for some,
- → A workday destination for others, and
- → A cultural or weekend draw for many more.

Understanding the market in tiers allows us to imagine how different reuse concepts will support daily life while also creating a regional draw. For example:

- → A café or coworking hub may rely on the 1–3 mile market
- → A food hall, performance venue, or cultural space can meet the needs of downtown's daily visitors AND serve as a destination for the broader 15-mile footprint and beyond

While the 1-, 3-, and 15-mile market areas were used to guide the analysis and understand patterns of use and opportunity, the study's findings are not organized by mileage range. Instead, they are interpreted through a broader, place-based lens that focuses on the overall potential for the site's reuse within downtown West Monroe and the wider community it serves.

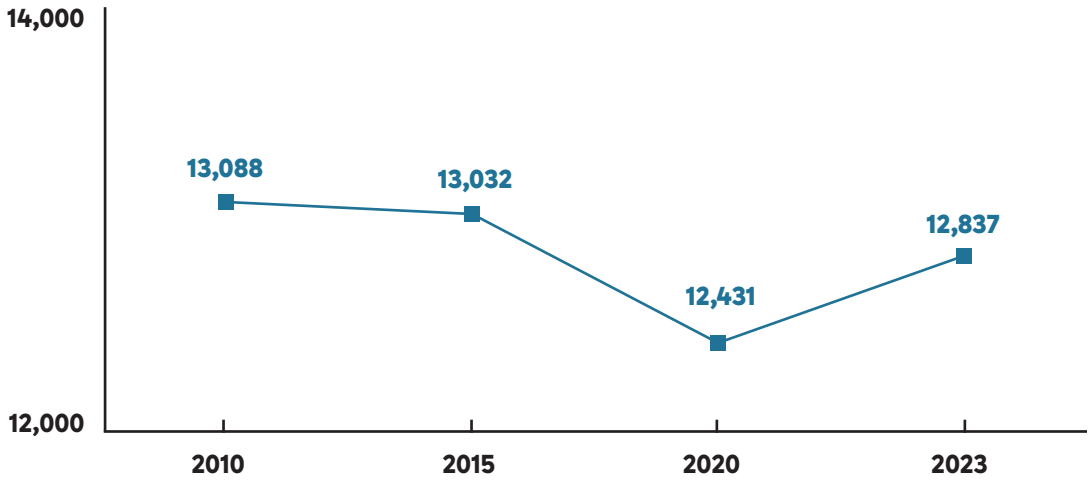
# RESEARCH & ANALYSIS

**This section synthesizes key demographic, economic, market, and stakeholder input to support viable reuse options for the privately owned, former First United Methodist Church in Downtown West Monroe.**

# Demographic & Socioeconomic Overview

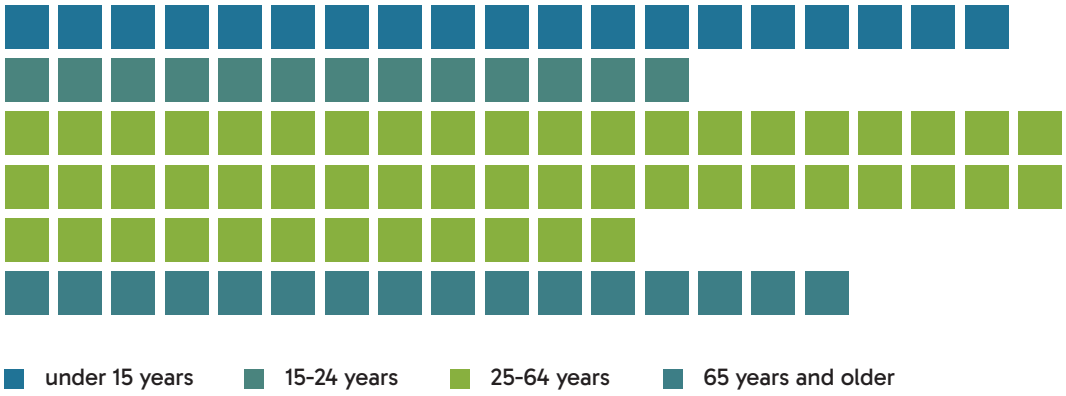
## POPULATION

There has been a slight population decline (-1.9%) since 2010, with modest anticipated growth tied to new employment opportunities at Meta, Entergy, and Mid-South developments.




## AGE & GENERATIONAL TAKEAWAYS

- → 52% of the population is between ages 25 and 64—prime working-age adults with potential for expendable income and lifestyle spending.
- → Nearly 10% of residents are between 18–24, with a strong local college presence enhancing this group's market weight.



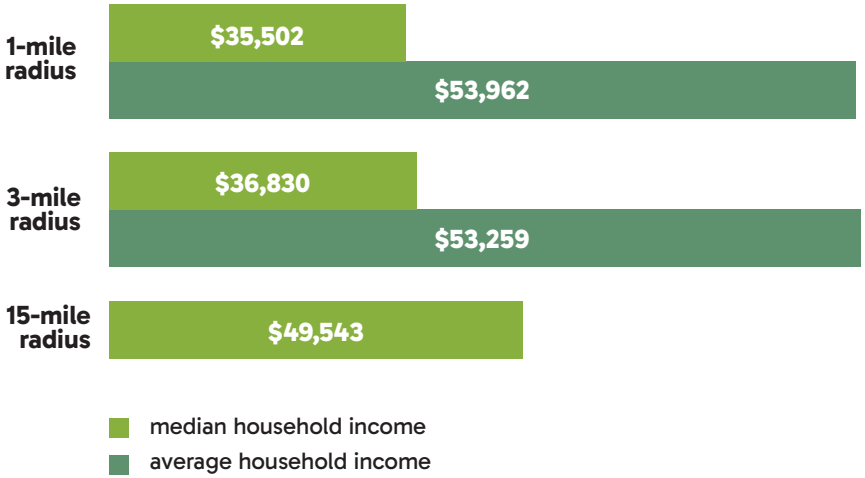
## LIVING WAGE FOR MONROE METROPOLITAN STATISTICAL AREA

| | 1 Adult | | | 2 Adults (1 working) | | | 2 Adults (both working) | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 0 Children | 1 Child | 2 Children | 0 Children | 1 Child | 2 Children | 0 Children | 1 Child | 2 Children |
| **Living Wage** | $19.35 | $33.88 | $41.58 | $27.74 | $33.98 | $37.49 | $13.87 | $19.30 | $23.29 |
| **Required Annual Income Before Taxes** | $40,240 | $70,468 | $86,495 | $57,705 | $70,684 | $77,976 | $57,705 | $80,277 | $96,897 |

Source: Amy K. Glasmeier, "Living Wage Calculator," Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2025.

## INCOME LEVELS

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, ACS 2018-2022



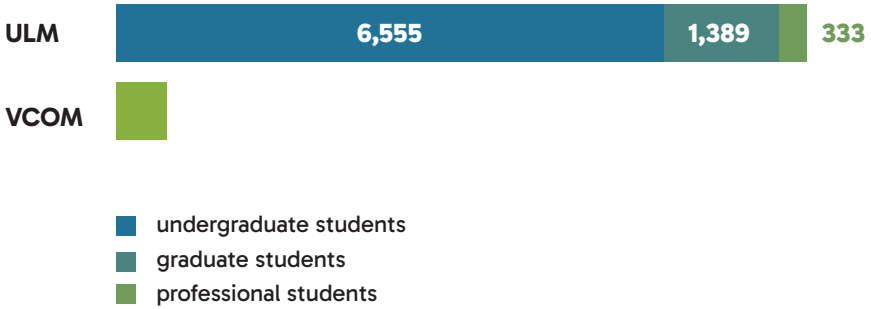

## PURCHASING POWER ANALYSIS

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the average household size in West Monroe is 2.42 people. The median household income within 1–3 miles of the church ($35,502–$36,830) falls short of the living wage for a single adult with no children ($40,240), and is well below what would be needed to support a two-parent household with a child (~$88K). Even though nearly half of households exceed the individual living wage threshold, a significant portion of the population, especially families with children, may be financially strained, limiting their discretionary spending.

## COLLEGE POPULATION

University of Louisiana Monroe (ULM) enrolled **8,277 students** during the 2024-2025 school year. ULM is primarily a commuter school, with only 372 on-campus beds.

During the 2023-2024 academic year, Edward Via College of Osteopathic Medicine (VCOM) enrolled roughly **600** medical students.



## STUDENT SPENDING BEHAVIOR
(NATIONAL TRENDS)

College students spend an average of **$410 per month** eating off-campus, totaling approximately **$4,920 annually**. This figure underscores the significant portion of their budget allocated to dining and entertainment experiences.

According to the U.S. Bank and Refuel Agency, students strongly prefer **social experiences** and "hangout spots" over traditional retail. Over 70% report prioritizing **unique, authentic, or locally relevant experiences** when choosing where to spend their money. Additionally, research from Georgia Southern University found that restaurants and sports bars are among the most desired retail businesses near campuses, highlighting students' inclination towards social venues.

Graduate students and medical students, like those at VCOM, tend to have **higher personal incomes** or loan-funded spending power and often seek low-stress **environments for socializing, networking, and unwinding**.

The data points to strong opportunity for a reuse concept that blends affordability, flexibility, and experience. **The former church is well-positioned to serve as a gathering space for all, but with a targeted market of working-age adults and college students**—two groups with a demonstrated interest in social, cultural, and dining experiences. To succeed, offerings should be priced accessibly, programmed creatively, and designed with both locals and regional visitors in mind.

For downtown West Monroe, this reinforces the value of **experience-driven development**. A revitalized church that functions as a **vibrant, multi-use venue** can anchor foot traffic, complement nearby businesses, and help the district appeal to younger residents, students, and professionals seeking quality of place. Downtown's future vitality will depend on attracting and retaining this demographic with offerings that balance affordability and quality. The site's reuse must feel relevant to locals, while also drawing from the broader 15-mile market, where spending power is higher.

**Not everyone can afford high-priced tickets, but that doesn't mean they want to miss out. The income story in West Monroe calls for a thoughtful mix: free and low-cost cultural events to keep it inclusive, paired with premium experiences (like concerts, private rentals, or food festivals) to bring in revenue. It's about creating a space where everyone feels welcome and where the books still balance.**

# Economic Base & Industry Composition

## TOP EMPLOYERS & SECTORS

West Monroe's economy remains anchored by three key sectors: **healthcare, education, and retail**, which together employ over 5,900 people locally. These industries shape much of the city's economic activity and directly impact foot traffic and consumer spending downtown. These sectors represent a large share of the workforce who either work in or pass through downtown, making them a **critical audience for dining, retail, and entertainment opportunities associated with the church reuse**.

### HEALTH CARE & SOCIAL ASSISTANCE

3,408 EMPLOYEES

LQ: 1.53

significantly above the national average

KEY EMPLOYERS

St. Francis Medical Center
Ochsner LSU Health
Affinity Health Group

### EDUCATIONAL SERVICES

641 EMPLOYEES

LQ: 0.54

industry remains underrepresented locally likely due to ULM's commuter model

KEY EMPLOYERS

University Louisiana Monroe
Louisiana Delta Community College

### RETAIL TRADE

1,882 EMPLOYEES

LQ: 1.30

an above-average concentration indicating strong local and regional consumer demand

ADDITIONAL NOTABLE SECTORS INCLUDE:

### ADMINISTRATIVE & SUPPORT SERVICES

1,294 JOBS

+7.1% 5-YEAR GROWTH

### ACCOMMODATION & FOOD SERVICES

2,261 JOBS

LQ: 1.75

Location Quotient (LQ) shows whether a type of job or industry is more or less common in a local area compared to the national average. For example, an LQ of 1.53 for Health Care and Social Assistance in West Monroe means that this sector is 53% more concentrated locally than it is nationally.

## GROWTH INDUSTRIES

Growth industries were identified using data from the 2024 Q3 JobsEQ Industry Snapshot for West Monroe, Monroe, and Ouachita Parish. Sectors with the highest potential were those that showed both positive employment growth over the past five years and positive one-year job growth projections. Assessing both points helps highlight **industries that are not only stable but also expected to expand locally**.

| Growth Industry | Former Church Reuse Opportunity |
|---|---|
| **Administrative & Support Services** | Flexible coworking space or shared office suites for small firms and startups |
| **Construction** | Training/event space for industry workshops, hiring fairs, or vendor showcases |
| **Utilities** | Community forum or exhibit space for public engagement on infrastructure projects |
| **Arts, Entertainment & Recreation** | Live performance venue, music hall, or community arts and event programming |
| **Professional & Technical Services** | Meeting space, networking hub, or pop-up talks for local professionals |

While overall employment in West Monroe declined by 0.7% over the past five years, a few sectors stand out for positive momentum or strategic potential:

- → **Administrative & Support Services:** +7.1% 5-year growth
- → **Construction:** +3.4% 5-year growth
- → **Utilities:** +4.3% 5-year growth (very high wages at $82K+)
- → **Arts, Entertainment & Recreation:** +4.0% 5-year growth

Understanding local growth industries ensures the church reuse strategy aligns with where West Monroe's economy is headed. Sectors like administrative services and construction are expanding locally, bringing new workers and demand for flexible spaces to gather. And growth in arts and entertainment suggests strong potential for music, performance, and cultural programming - reuse options that have also been well-supported through community input.

## REGIONAL INVESTMENTS & ECONOMIC MOMENTUM

The recent opening of the West Monroe Sports and Events Facility has helped position West Monroe as the second-largest economic generator in Ouachita Parish. This facility is drawing regional visitors, catalyzing hotel development and short-term rental activity, and demonstrating a clear appetite for community-scale destination venues.

The city has also invested over $2.5 million in infrastructure upgrades, including drainage improvements in the industrial park and walkability enhancements along Main Street. These efforts strengthen the downtown district's readiness for further private investment.

## META'S REGIONAL IMPACT

**The $10 billion Meta AI Data Center under development in neighboring Richland Parish is expected to create:**

- → **1,500+ new jobs (short-term construction and long-term operations)**
- → **Long-term salaries averaging over $88,000 annually**

**This influx of well-paid workers will drive up regional demand for housing, retail, dining, and entertainment. West Monroe is likely to attract a substantial portion of that activity due to its urban amenities and cultural offerings.**

West Monroe is entering a period of sustained economic momentum, driven by growth in health care, hospitality, and regional investment. The former church has the potential to serve as a cornerstone cultural and economic asset in this new chapter, providing the kind of flexible, high-impact venue that complements workforce growth, tourism, and local quality of life.

From after-work dining and music to weekend events and artisan markets, the **church's reuse could be a powerful connector between the city's historic identity and its modern economic trajectory**. For downtown, it reinforces the shift toward a vibrant, multi-use district that attracts both residents and regional visitors.

# Business Climate & Entrepreneurial Ecosystem

## DOWNTOWN COMPOSITION

Downtown West Monroe is home to a vibrant collection of small businesses that reflect the city's personality and potential:

| | |
|---|---|
| BOUTIQUES AND SPECIALTY SHOPS | 31 |
| FOOD AND DRINK ESTABLISHMENTS *including only three restaurants open in the evening and three cafés serving daytime crowds* | 13 |
| PERSONAL CARE BUSINESSES *(salons/spas)* | 10 |
| ART GALLERIES OR STUDIOS | 5 |
| EVENT VENUES | 3 |
| BED AND BREAKFASTS | 4 |

This mix is heavily weighted toward retail and daytime services, with a clear absence of nighttime destinations and flexible, experience-oriented business types.

## BARRIERS & GAPS

Community input consistently pointed to a lack of evening activities, food options, and social spaces downtown. Over 70% of survey respondents said they would visit downtown more often if it had more dining and nightlife, and more than half prioritized entertainment, live music, and social gathering spaces.

**RETAIL DEMAND FAR EXCEEDS SUPPLY ACROSS KEY CATEGORIES:**

### DINING OUT

Residents in the 1-mile area alone spend **$4.1 million annually**, with **$132 million** in the 15-mile radius.

### BARS AND NIGHTLIFE

Local spending is **15% below the national average** (MPI: 85), indicating unmet demand.

### SPECIALTY GOODS AND ARTISAN RETAIL

Show strong potential, especially in fine jewelry (MPI: 119) and hobby-related goods.

There's a strong price-sensitivity trend in the region (MPI: 110 for buying based on price over brand), **highlighting the need for accessible, value-oriented retail options**.

Market Potential Index (MPI) measures how likely local residents are to spend money in a certain category compared to the national average. An MPI of 100 matches the national average; numbers below 100 show lower local spending, and numbers above 100 show higher spending.

There is strong alignment between these market gaps and the lifestyle preferences of West Monroe's population, based on ESRI Tapestry Segmentation:

- → The largest segments include Small Town Sincerity (12C), Midlife Constants (5E), and Hometown Heritage (8G)—all of which favor local, familiar experiences and value affordability, authenticity, and gathering spaces.
- → Young and Restless (11B) and City Commons (11E) represent younger, budget-conscious consumers with an appetite for social connection, dining out, and creative experiences.

These segments suggest that experience-based businesses, flexible small-scale retail, and accessible food and entertainment venues are well-aligned with the local market. Specifically, the demand is strong for:

- → Food halls or casual dining spaces with evening hours
- → Artisan or maker markets
- → Coworking spaces with integrated food or retail
- → Multi-use entertainment or event spaces
- → Outdoor food truck courts and seasonal pop-up markets

The church project can directly fill identified gaps: **casual dining, evening activities, and unique experience-driven retail.** As an adaptive reuse project, it can offer smaller spaces for local entrepreneurs to pilot concepts without needing full-scale storefronts. This lowers the barrier for business development downtown while inviting more people to linger in the district during evenings and weekends.

## TAPESTRY SEGMENTATION

### SMALL TOWN SINCERITY

Includes young families and senior householders that are bound by community ties.

The lifestyle is down-to-earth and semirural, with emphasis on convenience for both young parents and senior citizens.

Residents embark on pursuits including renting movies and rural activities like hunting and fishing.

Residents keep their finances simple—paying bills in person and avoiding debt.

### MIDLIFE CONSTANTS

Residents are seniors, at or approaching retirement, with below-average labor force participation and below-average net worth.

Although located in predominantly metropolitan areas, they live outside the central cities, in smaller communities.

Their lifestyle is more country than urban.

They are generous but not spendthrifts.

### HOMETOWN HERITAGE

Neighborhoods are in urbanized areas within central cities, with older housing, located mainly in the Midwest and South.

This slightly smaller market is primarily a family market, married couples (with and without children) and single parents.

60% of householders are renters, living primarily in single-family homes, with a higher proportion of dwellings in 2–4 unit buildings.

### YOUNG & RESTLESS

Well-educated young workers, some of whom are still completing their education, are employed in professional and technical occupations

These residents are not established yet, but striving to get ahead.

More than half of all householders are under the age of 35, the majority living alone or in shared nonfamily dwellings.

Median household income is still below the US.

Smartphones are a way of life, and they use the internet extensively.

### CITY COMMONS

One of the youngest markets.

It is primarily composed of single-parent and single-person households living within large metro cities located primarily in the eastern half of the US.

These residents strive for the best for themselves and their children.

# Workforce & Talent Pipeline

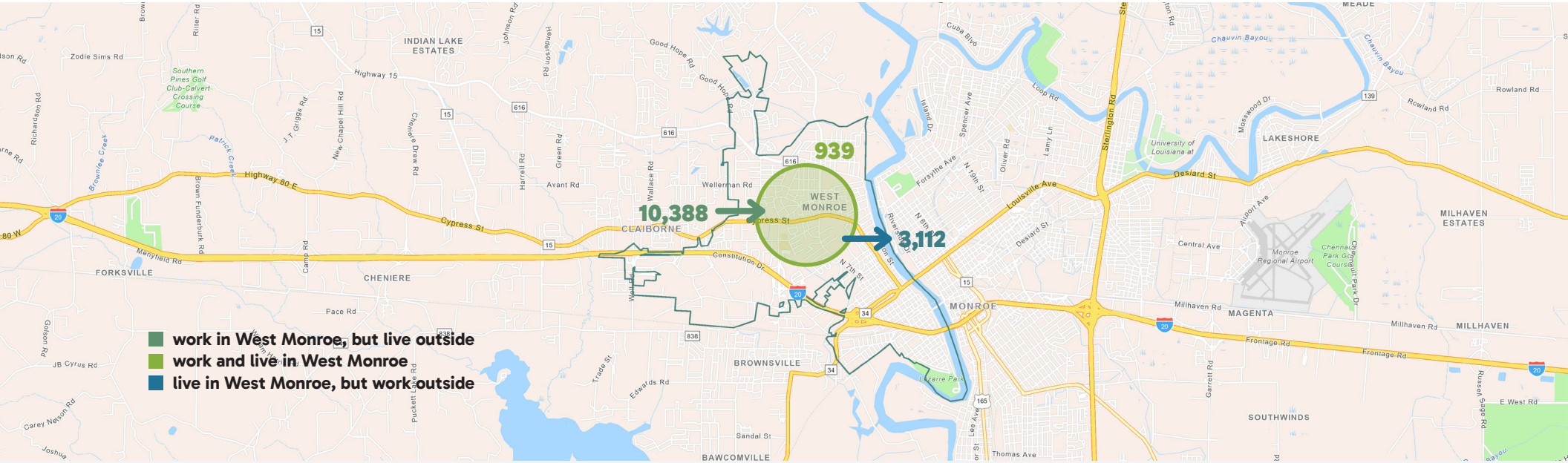
West Monroe's labor force is defined by a mix of steady job inflow, modest educational attainment, and a workforce that largely commutes in from outside the city. Understanding the area's labor force dynamics is key because it helps identify who is most likely to use, benefit from, and support downtown spaces.

## COMMUTER-DRIVEN DOWNTOWN

West Monroe's economy is largely powered by a commuter workforce. In 2022, only 8.5% of people who worked in West Monroe also lived in the city. Nearly 92% of jobs are filled by people commuting in from surrounding communities. This commuter base is a prime target for lunchtime dining, coworking spaces, and after-work activities.

## HIGH WORKFORCE PARTICIPATION, LOW LOCAL RETENTION

While West Monroe has a strong prime-age labor force participation rate (79.6%), the majority of residents (78%) work outside the city, indicating a significant outflow of potential spending. Creating reasons for locals to stay downtown, or return for evening and weekend events, can help reverse this pattern.



## INCOME AND AGE MIX

A sizable portion of both inbound and outbound workers earn middle incomes ($1,251–$3,333/month), and over half are between ages 30 and 54—a prime demographic for food, culture, and wellness offerings.

## EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT & ENTREPRENEURSHIP POTENTIAL

Among residents aged 25–64:

- 15.4% have no high school diploma
- 32.6% are high school graduates
- 38% have some college or an associate's degree
- 22.3% hold a bachelor's or postgraduate degree

This mix indicates a potential market for skills-based training, microenterprise support, and low-barrier business models like market booths, food stalls, or flexible retail kiosks. These opportunities are further supported by the local community —public workshops and Facebook comments revealed strong community interest in low-barrier business models like shared kitchens, food truck plazas, and pop-up stalls. Residents frequently pointed to the opportunity to support local entrepreneurs while creating engaging, rotating experiences for visitors.

## LOW WORK-FROM-HOME RATE, LIMITED FLEX-SPACE OPTIONS

Just 3.8% of residents currently work from home, suggesting that while remote work is present, it's underdeveloped locally. Affordable and community-oriented coworking options, especially those that include or are near amenities like coffee, lunch, and event spaces, could increase downtown vibrancy on weekdays.

The data underscores the opportunity for the former church to become a hub for West Monroe's commuter and entrepreneurial workforce:

- A casual restaurant or food hall could serve both the inbound workforce and retain local residents after work.
- A coworking and meeting space could attract freelancers, hybrid workers, or small teams from outside the city.
- Pop-up retail, artisan markets, and vendor-style stalls could offer low-risk entry points for aspiring local entrepreneurs.
- Evening and weekend programming, such as live music, networking events, or workshops, would activate the space for both local residents and regional visitors.

These strategies not only support the successful reuse of the church but also contribute to the long-term economic and cultural resilience of downtown West Monroe.

# Housing Needs & Opportunities

A vibrant downtown depends on more than just businesses and amenities—it also needs people living nearby. Understanding local housing conditions helps identify who is (and isn't) able to live close to downtown, what types of housing are missing, and how the reuse of the church site might complement or support future residential growth.

While this study doesn't provide a deep dive into West Monroe's housing ecosystem, the insights included highlight a mismatch between household size and housing supply, limited ownership opportunities, and the need for more walkable, lifestyle-oriented housing options—factors that should inform broader downtown revitalization efforts.

West Monroe's housing landscape is defined by an aging population, a high share of renters, modest affordability, and a limited pipeline of new or diverse housing types.

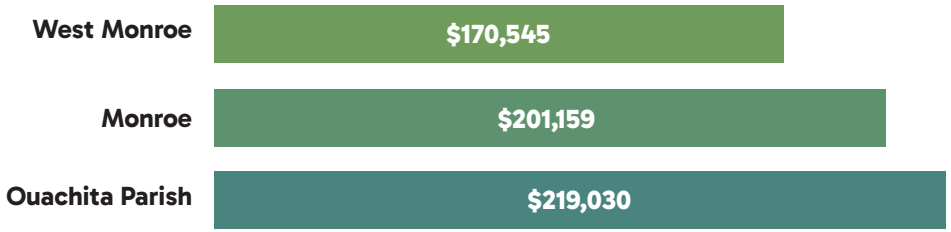
**AS OF 2024:**

Only **45%** of occupied housing units are owner-occupied, compared to **59%** parish-wide.

More than **70% of households** in West Monroe consist of just one or two people, yet most of the housing stock is made up of 3- and 4-bedroom homes.

Over half of all housing units are rentals, with a **renter vacancy rate of 11.7%**, indicating both turnover and potentially substandard options

The median home value in West Monroe is $170,545, significantly lower than Monroe ($201,159) and Ouachita Parish overall ($219,030), but values are projected to grow by 20%+ by 2029.



## AFFORDABILITY SNAPSHOT

According to ESRI, West Monroe scores a Housing Affordability Index of 106, meaning housing is relatively more affordable than in comparison markets.

**24.4%** OF HOUSEHOLD INCOME GOES TO MORTGAGE PAYMENTS IN WEST MONROE.

IN NEIGHBORING MONROE, THAT FIGURE RISES TO **35.4%**, INDICATING GREATER AFFORDABILITY STRESS IN ADJACENT AREAS.

The city's comparative advantage can support future housing demand, but new development must remain cost-conscious to stay accessible.

**West Monroe's relative affordability makes it an attractive location for entry-level homeowners, seniors downsizing, or younger professionals, but also means that housing developments must be cost-effective and creative in order to be financially viable.**

## REGIONAL DYNAMICS

Across Ouachita Parish, the homeownership rate is nearly 60%, much higher than in West Monroe (45%) and Monroe (43%). This indicates that housing demand in the region includes a large market for buyers, even if urban cores like West Monroe are more renter-heavy.

The parish is projected to see steady income growth through 2029, with a $56,477 median household income, creating more pressure for quality, affordable housing options. The housing data presents several strategic opportunities for downtown West Monroe:

- → The dominance of 1- and 2-person households, along with an older adult population, suggests demand for compact, accessible, and walkable housing in or near downtown. Any reuse scenario that integrates residential units, such as lofts or artist housing above ground-floor retail uses would meet this growing need.
- → With residential vacancy trending up and owner occupancy low, the former church could be part of a broader strategy to stabilize the downtown residential base by adding unique units integrated with dining, entertainment, or coworking functions.
- → The property could support or complement nearby housing by offering amenities or services that enhance livability, like walkable dining, community events, or cultural programming.

**While full residential reuse may not be feasible within the church building, pairing it with nearby housing development could create a strong live-work-play cluster downtown.**

# Infrastructure & Site Readiness

The former First United Methodist Church sits at a strategic location in downtown West Monroe - close to public amenities, within the footprint of city infrastructure improvements, and adjacent to a historically significant rail corridor. While the site's physical footprint and architectural integrity support adaptive reuse, surrounding infrastructure conditions, both existing and planned, play a crucial role in determining feasibility and potential impacts.

## HISTORIC STRUCTURE & EXISTING SITE LAYOUT

The 1.7-acre parcel contains a 1920 Colonial Revival church with a mid-century education annex. The building's T-shaped footprint, raised basement, tall sanctuary, and multiple points of access provide versatility for reuse concepts such as performance space, coworking, event rental, or food hall. Recent improvements to the annex included upgrades to electrical, HVAC, ADA accessibility, and roofing, though the original church building still requires additional investment.

## DOWNTOWN INFRASTRUCTURE CONDITIONS

According to the Downtown Streetscape Master Plan, this area of West Monroe is served by infrastructure that is 80–100 years old, with aging utility systems and limited documentation. These conditions introduce some uncertainty but are actively being addressed through phased city investments.

- **Water & Sewer:** Condition and capacity are not fully mapped. A site-specific pressure and flow test will be necessary to determine feasibility for food-related or high-capacity public uses
- **Electric:** Current systems are above ground and may require upgrades to support commercial kitchens, AV equipment, or event lighting
- **Stormwater:** No major flooding issues reported, but system capacity review is advised with any increase in impermeable surfaces
- **ADA & Pedestrian Infrastructure:** Nearby intersections and sidewalks do not fully meet ADA standards and pedestrian connections are inconsistent. These are targeted for improvement in upcoming phases of the city's streetscape upgrades

## RAILROAD PROXIMITY

A rail line borders the site directly, shaping both physical access and reuse considerations. This location presents a dual reality:

- → Noise and vibration may constrain sensitive uses such as overnight lodging or classrooms unless mitigated through soundproofing or creative layout design.
- → Visibility and transportation potential make the site ideal for public-facing or visitor-serving uses, especially if rail becomes an active passenger route.

Concerns about noise and pedestrian safety near the rail line were raised in both public workshops and community comments. Some suggested a sound barrier that doubles as a safety feature or art wall, while others highlighted the train as part of West Monroe's culture. It was also noted that the addition of light rail or passenger service could be a potential draw.

## FUTURE OPPORTUNITY: PASSENGER RAIL ON THE I-20 CORRIDOR

Proposed passenger rail service along the I-20 corridor, including a potential station within one mile of the church site, could significantly boost visitor traffic. According to an economic benefits assessment, the new service would:

- → Inject $3 million annually in new visitor-related revenue across participating communities
- → Drive $293,923 in new annual visitor spending in Ouachita Parish alone
- → Generate a projected 11% increase in induced new travelers regionally

Given the church's proximity to the proposed station and its potential reuse as a destination for arts, dining, or cultural events, it is well-positioned to capture and amplify those impacts.

The reuse of the former church building will depend not only on its architectural potential but on the city's ability to partner on infrastructure readiness. Aging utilities, rail adjacency, and public improvements should be addressed early in the implementation process. However, these constraints are balanced by emerging opportunities, including city-led investment, multimodal accessibility, and increased regional rail connectivity.

# PUBLIC INPUT SUMMARY

Community engagement throughout this study revealed a deeply rooted interest in making downtown West Monroe more lively, welcoming, and experience-driven. Across surveys, public comments, and in-person workshops, participants articulated a clear vision for a downtown that prioritizes social connection, local character, and flexible gathering spaces.

## PEOPLE WANT TO BE DOWNTOWN— THEY JUST NEED MORE REASONS TO STAY

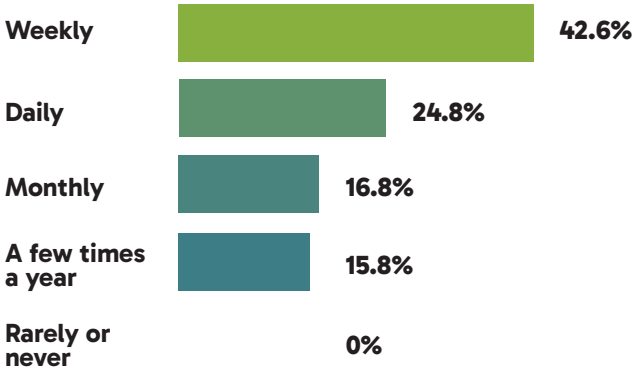
Frequent visits to downtown are already common: nearly **70%** of survey respondents reported visiting daily or weekly. However, the reasons for visiting are often limited to daytime errands or work-related trips.

What's missing, and what people consistently say would bring them back more often, is the **opportunity to linger**, especially in the evenings and on weekends.

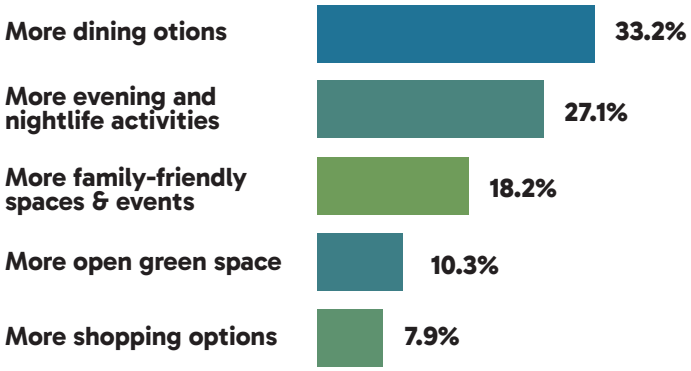
Participants expressed strong interest in spaces that:

- → Encourage socializing, whether through outdoor seating, live music, or shared meals
- → Provide a reason to visit after 5 PM
- → Feel welcoming for families, young professionals, and older adults alike

FROM THE SURVEY:
**HOW OFTEN DO YOU VISIT DOWNTOWN WEST MONROE?**




FROM THE SURVEY:
**WHAT WOULD ENCOURAGE YOU TO VISIT DOWNTOWN MORE OFTEN?**



FROM THE SURVEY:

**HOW OFTEN WOULD YOU VISIT DOWNTOWN FOR THE FOLLOWING EXPERIENCES?**

**61.4% OF RESPONDENTS**
SAID THEY WOULD VISIT DOWNTOWN WEEKLY OR MONTHLY FOR LIVE ENTERTAINMENT

**58.4%**
EXPRESSED THE SAME INTEREST IN SPECIALTY OR CELEBRATION-STYLE RESTAURANTS

## **DINING, ENTERTAINMENT, AND GATHERING** SPACES ARE TOP PRIORITIES

While the specific ideas varied from rooftop brunch spots to speakeasies and cultural venues, nearly all public input centered around the same core themes: **more places to eat, gather, and experience culture**.

Key findings include:

- Dining options are limited, especially casual, locally owned, or chef-driven experiences
- Nightlife is limited, and there's a strong desire for live music, jazz, comedy, and social bars
- Event and performance venues are lacking, particularly spaces that can host weddings, concerts, and community events
- Many people want green space with purpose - think food truck courts, shaded picnic areas, outdoor stages, and art installations, not passive lawns

Respondents were enthusiastic about creative concepts like:

- A multilevel food hall with rooftop dining
- A speakeasy-style bar or jazz club in the church basement
- Celebration-style restaurants like steakhouses or chef-driven dining
- An artisan market, makerspace, or pop-up corridor that supports local artists and entrepreneurs
- A community museum or cultural storytelling space that celebrates the rich diversity of Ouachita Parish

## THERE IS CLEAR SUPPORT FOR CREATIVE REUSE, **BUT ALSO SENSITIVITY**

The idea of repurposing a church into a food hall, event venue, or bar was generally embraced, especially when those uses honor the building's architecture and role in the community's history. That said, several participants raised concerns about:

- Maintaining the building's dignity and integrity
- Infrastructure-related issues, especially noise from the nearby railroad, and available parking

Possible concerns about public perception of alcohol use in a former church were raised in each of the visioning workshops.

While no attendees expressed personal objections to reuse concepts involving alcohol, the group acknowledged that positioning alcohol as a complement rather than the focus of the business model, such as in a restaurant, lounge, or event space, would likely help mitigate potential community concerns.

Workshop participants and online commenters frequently highlighted an interest in artisan markets, food truck courts, pop-up retail, and maker spaces, suggesting a desire for a downtown that feels lively, current, and representative of local culture. National research supports this instinct: today's consumers, especially younger generations, are drawn to places that reflect authenticity, experience, and community.

According to a 2023 report from Project for Public Spaces and Main Street America, experience-oriented businesses like markets, workshops, performance venues, and mobile vendors create a magnetic pull in downtown districts. They tend to attract more foot traffic, encourage repeat visits, increase dwell time (the amount of time people spend in an area), and create more opportunities for casual social interaction, which fosters a stronger sense of belonging

Beyond activating the street, this type of development has important economic and community-building benefits:

- Pop-up shops, food trucks, and vendor stalls allow people to test business ideas without the overhead of a full storefront, making entrepreneurship more accessible, especially for underrepresented groups.
- These formats create opportunities for seasonal, rotating, and themed experiences, giving people a reason to come back again and again.
- Creative space, whether for artists, chefs, or musicians, gives local talent a place to grow and thrive, adding to the distinct cultural fabric of the district.
- Small-scale, flexible spaces invite diverse entrepreneurs, including young creatives, first-time business owners, and side hustlers into the downtown economy

## NOTABLE QUOTES FROM THE PUBLIC SURVEY

"Please don't tear down the trees for more parking! I just want a **shady spot to sip my coffee and read my book** after running errands downtown."

"A brunch spot with a cute outdoor scene! People want a place to **gather outside and enjoy a meal.**"

"Make it a space where I can **drink coffee, hear jazz, and buy something handmade from a local artist**—yes, all in the same place."

"**Food truck court with games to keep people engaged**—cornhole, ping pong, Jenga... Make a part of the property covered in canopy like Alley Park in case of bad weather."

"**FOOD TRUCKS WOULD BE GREAT.** THERE IS NOT ENOUGH FOOD OPTIONS IN THAT AREA. WE NEED LUNCH SPOTS ESPECIALLY."

"**I LOVE the idea of a food truck court.** It's hard to keep up with local trucks—I'd pay more for one-of-a-kind foods in a chill space with picnic tables."

"A **bar and a dog park.** That's it. That's the vision."

"Outdoor stage + picnic space = summer nights done right."

"A **brunch spot with outdoor seating**, flowers, and mimosas. People would come just to hang out!"

"A **rooftop with a view of the city**? That's where I'm going for date night or after work."

"A Europe-style square—a paved, well-lit space where locals could sit, chat, have coffee, or spend a lunch break. Think open-mic nights, small concerts, and seasonal festivals. **Less parking. More vibes.**"

"We need **more event venues.** Large spaces to hold receptions or events are limited, especially in West Monroe."

"Live music, poetry reads... **somewhere for community voices to be heard.**"

"A speakeasy in the church basement would be **legendary.**"

## PUBLIC SPACE SHOULD BE ACTIVE, INVITING, AND **DESIGNED FOR ENGAGEMENT**

The public is asking for places to be outdoors, comfortably, with others. Suggestions for surrounding green space included:

- → Outdoor stages and gathering areas for live performances
- → Canopied seating, yard games, and picnic areas
- → Food truck courts with rotating vendors
- → Spaces for community gardening, family activities, and local markets

## Takeaway: The Public Is Ready

This engagement process revealed a community that values both accessibility and atmosphere. While affordability should be considered in parts of the programming, especially for everyday dining or public events, residents also expressed a strong desire for memorable, higher-quality experiences that feel worthy of a night out.

**This suggests that the reuse of the church doesn't need to choose between being affordable or upscale—it can do both, offering a mix of everyday gathering spaces and elevated experiences.** If future development honors the building's historic character while supporting a variety of price points and programs, it's likely to receive broad community support and become a meaningful downtown destination.

# MARKET- & COMMUNITY-SUPPORTED REUSE CONCEPTS

The reuse of the former First United Methodist Church in downtown West Monroe presents an opportunity to address clear gaps in the local market while responding directly to community preferences. Public input, market trends, and economic data converge around a shared vision: the former church can be transformed into a space that is welcoming, vibrant, and flexible —one that honors the building's historic identity while supporting West Monroe's downtown revitalization goals.

# LIVE PERFORMANCE VENUE / EVENT SPACE

## COMMUNITY SUPPORT

**71 RESPONDENTS (70.3%)**
CHOSE A PERFORMANCE OR EVENT SPACE
Most-selected reuse concept in the public survey

**61.4%** SAID THEY WOULD VISIT DOWNTOWN WEEKLY OR MONTHLY FOR LIVE ENTERTAINMENT

COMMON THEMES INCLUDED A **MUSIC VENUE, "HOUSE OF BLUES" CONCEPT, COMMUNITY STAGE, AND SPACE FOR COMEDY, JAZZ, OR CULTURAL EVENTS.**

## MARKET DEMAND

ARTS, ENTERTAINMENT & RECREATION JOBS **GREW +4.0% OVER FIVE YEARS**

HOUSEHOLDS IN THE REGION SPEND OVER **$230K ANNUALLY** ON RECREATION AND ENTERTAINMENT—PROJECTED TO GROW THROUGH 2029

**52% OF RESIDENTS ARE IN THEIR PRIME WORKING AND SPENDING YEARS**

NEARLY **10% ARE COLLEGE-AGED** (ULM + VCOM STUDENTS), A DEMOGRAPHIC THAT PRIORITIZES SOCIAL EXPERIENCES

## STRATEGIC FIT

ALIGNS WITH CITY PRIORITIES TO **INCREASE NIGHTTIME ACTIVITY, ACTIVATE HISTORIC SPACES, AND ENHANCE CULTURAL PROGRAMMING**

CAN ACCOMMODATE CONCERTS, WEDDINGS, COMEDY NIGHTS, LOCAL THEATER, AND COMMUNITY EVENTS, OFFERING **BROAD APPEAL AND PROGRAMMING FLEXIBILITY.**

# FOOD HALL, RESTAURANT, OR SPEAKEASY

## COMMUNITY SUPPORT

**71%** OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS SAID MORE DINING OPTIONS WOULD ENCOURAGE THEM TO VISIT DOWNTOWN MORE OFTEN

**58.4%** EXPRESSED STRONG INTEREST IN SPECIALTY OR CELEBRATION-STYLE RESTAURANTS

DOZENS OF WORKSHOP AND FACEBOOK COMMENTS SUGGESTED CHEF-LED CONCEPTS, SPEAKEASIES, ROOFTOP BRUNCH SPOTS, AND FOOD TRUCK HUBS

## MARKET DEMAND

**$132 MILLION IS SPENT ANNUALLY ON DINING** IN THE 15-MILE RADIUS, YET DOWNTOWN LACKS EVENING OPTIONS

LOCAL SPENDING ON BARS AND NIGHTLIFE IS 15% BELOW THE NATIONAL AVERAGE (MPI: 85), **INDICATING AN UNTAPPED OPPORTUNITY**

WITH MANY HOUSEHOLDS EARNING BELOW THE REGIONAL LIVING WAGE, **AFFORDABLE YET QUALITY-DRIVEN CONCEPTS LIKE FOOD HALLS ARE A STRATEGIC MATCH**

## STRATEGIC FIT

CAN SERVE BOTH WEEKDAY LUNCH TRAFFIC (COMMUTERS, DOWNTOWN WORKERS) AND EVENING/WEEKEND CROWDS

A **FOOD HALL OR SPEAKEASY** WITH FOOD SERVICE COMPLEMENTS A PERFORMANCE VENUE AND OFFERS FLEXIBLE VENDOR SPACE FOR LOCAL CHEFS AND ENTREPRENEURS

## A HYBRID MODEL FOR SUSTAINABILITY & IMPACT

Feedback and analysis point toward a blended approach, pairing high-demand concepts into a multi-use, revenue-generating destination. This hybrid model allows for inclusive programming that serves diverse users—weekday workers, young professionals, visiting families, and the creative community.

**INSIDE THE CHURCH**

- → Live Music + Event Venue (Sanctuary)
- → Speakeasy-style Lounge or Dinner Club (Basement)
- → Pop-up Retail, Bar, or Art Installations (Common Areas or Annex)

**OUTSIDE THE CHURCH**

- → Food Truck Court with Shaded Seating and Lighting
- → Small Amphitheater for Casual Performances
- → Creative Corridor for Seasonal Artisan Vendors or Markets
- → Reuse of Parsonage as Airbnb, Green Room, or Artist-in-Residence Space

## BROADER COMMUNITY VISION

In addition to the two dominant reuse themes, public feedback emphasized a desire for:

- → Outdoor green space with purpose, such as shaded seating, live music, and yard games. Support for a food truck court appeared over 40 times in Facebook & survey comments
- → Programming that balances free or affordable community events with premium rentals or ticketed offerings
- → A space that reflects both the community's historic roots and its desire for creative, modern experiences

The concepts supported through this study are more than feasible—they are **market-justified, community-backed, and aligned with West Monroe's vision for its downtown.** With thoughtful implementation, flexible space design, and strategic partnerships, the former church can become a catalyst for economic activity, cultural expression, and civic pride.

DEVELOPED BY ATLAS COMMUNITY STUDIOS © 2025

# MARKET STUDY FOR THE HISTORIC METHODIST CHURCH IN DOWNTOWN WEST MONROE, LA

## SITE REUSE PLAN & FEASIBILITY STUDY FOR THE CITY OF WEST MONROE, LOUISIANA