

Monroe in line for movie

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If all goes as planned, northeastern Louisiana will soon be in pictures.

Author Alice Ball-Breuer and producer Andy Van Roon met with members of the Monroe Chamber of Commerce and the Northeast Louisiana Film and Video Association on Friday to discuss filming an adaptation of Ball's book, "Beyond the Dark Bayou," here in Monroe.



Brandt J. Thomas

Author Alice Ball-Breuer, left, and producer Andy Van Roon, right, hope to film a movie in Monroe.

In a week where the community has been dealing with a lot of bad news, Ball hoped the prospect of a movie coming to town would be a ray of light.

"With State Farm leaving, what better time to announce that we're bringing the film industry here," she said.

All parties involved thought the film could be a big boon for Monroe on a number of fronts. Van Roon said he thinks it could greatly increase tourism, as people would want to come and see features of the movie like the Biedenharn Museum and Gardens or Bayou DeSiard.

"We would like to basically do for Monroe what 'Steel Magnolias' did for Natchitoches," Van Roon said. "We would like to showcase the town and help support the local movement to bring film here."

Lonny Kaufman, director of the Department of Economic Development's entertainment cluster, speaking to the group by phone, echoed Van Roon in pointing out the impact of "Steel Magnolias."

"Nothing impacts tourism like a movie," he said. "Natchitoches is still benefiting from 'Steel Magnolias' years and years later."

Kaufman said studies he's seen show that the impact of a movie project is about three times the budget of the movie. With a projected \$5 million budget for "Beyond the Dark Bayou," that could mean as much as \$15 million to Monroe. Angie Shennum of the Northeast Louisiana Film and Video Association, which was founded to promote the area to the film industry, pointed out that a few productions like this could help offset the \$50 million the community is losing from the departure State Farm.

"If we can make an impact and get this going, we won't be hurt as much by State Farm leaving," she said.

Van Roon said he plans to use as many local people as possible in the production of the film. He has met with ULM president James Cofer about the possibility of using facilities at the university, and he's also met with local and state leaders. He said he's encouraged by the response he received from Gov. Kathleen Blanco, state Rep. Francis Thompson, D-Delhi, Mayor Jamie Mayo and other leaders.

"The entire power structure of this area has been incredibly gracious, warm and supportive," he said. "Quite frankly, they've expressed a real vision."

According to Aimee Kane, vice president of administration for the Monroe Chamber of Commerce, there's also some talk of trying to get local musicians like Tim McGraw and Andy Griggs involved for the soundtrack. She said calls have started coming in from people all over the state who want to be involved in some way.

Ball's book chronicles the struggles she and her first husband, James Ball, had with hardships and medical problems that eventually took his life, and how they persevered through spiritual strength.

"It's about having your faith tested," Van Roon said. "It's a heartbreaking story from beginning to end."

Ball is excited about seeing her book turned into a movie, and she's also pleased about the prospect of filming here in Monroe, where the story is set.

"It's a miracle the way this has all come together," she said. "It's really mushroomed."