

James Gill

Beyond environmental unconcern

These are heady times for St. John Parish President Lester Millet, unabashed champion of the Formosa Plastics Corp. plant planned at the Whitney Plantation.

In the midst of the Whitney row, Millet has now come under federal investigation for allegedly filling wetlands on some land he owns at Woodland Plantation.

The common thread between the Whitney and Woodland controversies is Millet's old friend Durel Matherne.

Matherne appeared on the scene when Formosa, seeking a site for its plant, broke off negotiations to buy 2,200 acres at Willow Bend from the Shell Oil Co.

If you must allow an international environmental rogue like Formosa to produce rayon and petrochemicals in St. John, Willow Bend had more to recommend it than Whitney.

The Shell property was already zoned industrial and construction there would not have impinged on residential neighborhoods, or threatened historical landmarks, as will be the case at Whitney.

Shell is keen to sell, George Hadley, who handles the company's real estate transactions, said. Asking price is \$17 million.

The price was ostensibly the

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sticking point and, indeed, Formosa wound up buying the Whitney Plantation, and adjoining properties — a total of 1,800 acres — for about \$9 million.

On the face of it, the discrepancy in price might seem to provide some justification for the insane notion that antebellum mansions are just the place to churn out polyvinyl chloride. In fact, the Shell price might have been negotiated down, since property often sells for less than its asking price and the site incorporates wetlands that could have been donated to the public in return for tax concessions.

But let us by all means concede that the Whitney site was cheaper for Formosa. It will still turn out much more expensive for the taxpayer, who will cough up \$25 million via the Port Commission to build a dock for the benefit of Formosa, which will lease it.

This would not have been necessary at Willow Bend, with its extensive river frontage, Hadley said.

The Whitney site would have been useless to Formosa without a zoning change, so that the parish council had it been so inclined, could have forced Formosa to build at Willow Bend or some other more suitable site. Instead, the council went along with Millet's wishes.

Alfred and Walter Barnes, members of the family that sold the plantation to Formosa, say that Millet's long-time associate Matherne was the real estate agent for the transaction. Matherne is also listed as agent on purchase agreements with the owners of adjoining property included in the deal.

It was Millet who suggested in a telephone call that Matherne be made agent on the property, which the Barnes family has long been anxious to sell, Walter Barnes said. Millet and Matherne could not be reached for comment.

No real estate commission would have been paid had Formosa bought Willow Bend, Hadley said.

Neither Alfred nor Walter Barnes could recall how much Matherne was paid in commission on the sale of the plantation, which fetched just under \$8 million. Under the standard commission rate of at least 6 percent, it would come to \$480,000 on the Barnes sale plus commission on adjoining land sales.

A nice payday, and one that owed much to Millet's relentless support for the Formosa plant.

A few months later — in July of last year — Millet paid \$200,000 for nine acres in Woodland Plantation, real estate records show. One month later, Millet sold half the land for the same amount. Thus, Millet wound up with 4½ acres of land that cost him nothing.

Who was the sucker who gave him such a good deal? Records show it was one Nancy Matherne. There are no prizes for guessing the name of her husband.

Sources in the real estate business say Millet is marketing the 4½ acres in nine lots at \$20,000 each. Everything was going so well until the Corps of Engineers and the FBI started making a fuss about the destruction of wetlands.

James Gill is a staff writer.

3,500
Whitney
\$6,153/acre
1727, w/Shell
Conrad's Formosa, in 1970