

## Suburban Report

## In the wake of Formosa's exit

BY DREW BROACH  
River Parishes bureau chief

Last year in this space, a columnist wrote: "Despite the environmental slugfest now playing out before federal regulators, Formosa Plastics is going to build its rayon plant at Wallace."

OK, so I was the columnist. Please pass the crow.

Last week, Formosa Plastics Corp. canceled plans for perhaps the largest single project announced in southeast Louisiana since the oil bust of the mid-1980s. Formosa said it would take the plant's 1,000 jobs and pollution to a foreign country.

The psychological effect on St. John the Baptist Parish, where almost one fifth of the residents live in poverty and the government uses economic development tax revenue to keep the sewerage budget solvent, was devastating.

Dozens of residents with less than 10th-grade skills in English and mathematics had signed up for remedial education classes designed to help them get jobs at Formosa. Some moved here for just that reason.

Public officials had increasingly abandoned their roles as lawmakers and begun acting more like employment agencies. "Many of us put our character and reputation on the line," Parish Councilman Dale Wolfe said.

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At a council meeting barely 24 hours after Formosa's announcement, Haston Lewis, whose district includes Wallace and the rest of the west bank, spoke haltingly for a moment of the prize that slipped from his fingers. Then he cut short his remarks, discreetly choking back emotion. A colleague took over, addressing the cable television audience, but no one was listening to him. What transfixed them instead, amplified over the microphone on the opposite side of the room, was the sound of Lewis no longer able to control his tears.

By then, the second-guessing and finger-pointing were rampant.

Some Formosa supporters blamed Wilfred Greene, a retired school principal in Wallace who drew national attention for being one of the few St. John Parish residents to stand up to Formosa.

For its part, Formosa cited a drawn-out permitting process, an uncertain rayon market, demands from the Environmental Protection Agency that it buy raw materials from "green" suppliers and the prospect of having

to delay construction for years because of a neighboring property owner's lawsuit.

EPA denied demanding anything from Formosa and said the company itself was mostly to blame for the long permitting process. Formosa, said EPA's regional administrator in a blunt letter to the company, repeatedly failed to meet deadlines for information and at one point went behind EPA's back and countermanded agency orders to a consulting company studying the plant's effect on the environment.

"If we had more cooperation and timely information when we needed it, it would not have taken so long," an EPA spokesman said. "We frankly have done everything to spoon-feed these people, and we've run into stumbling blocks all along."

Likely as not, all these things directly or indirectly influenced Formosa's decision. But it's less important now to assign blame than it is to draw a couple of sobering lessons from the past three years:

► That putting all our eggs in a single basket leaves us awfully disappointed when the basket gets dropped. Instead of blindly drooling over a single Formosa that promises 1,000 jobs (or a single casino that promises a like amount), we should be pursuing more and smaller visions of economic salvation.

Last year in this space, a columnist wrote that Formosa would make a big splash when it opened and just as big a splash when it closes, then went on to offer a contrasting vision:

"Ten companies. Each hires 100 people. They offer 10 different products or services. They make a series of small splashes when, over several years, they open. But the effect is the same: 1,000 jobs. When one or even two closes, the splash is negligible. And the likelihood that all 10 diverse companies will close is infinitesimal."

Sure, it's a lot harder to attract 10 companies than it is to concentrate on just one. But it serves our economic and our psychological health a lot better.

Now please pass me the crow