

EPA gets an earful on S

By BOB WARREN
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Supporters and opponents of the proposed Formosa Plastics Corp. plant tangled Thursday during the first of what will be a series of Environmental Protection Agency hearings.

The hearing, called a "scoping meeting" by EPA officials, quickly turned into a sequel of April's rancorous St. John the Baptist Parish Council hearings on the plant, slated for construction on the west bank.

And the most recent testimony indicates that opinions haven't softened since April.

Last April, the Parish Council rezoned a tract of land in Wallace, most of it on the Whitney Plantation, to accommodate the \$2 billion plant.

Formosa first plans a \$700 million rayon-producing plant on the 1,800-acre site. Long-range plans include a petrochemical complex, possibly including a polyvinyl chloride plant.

Thursday's EPA hearing, however, was only to help the agency establish

what issues are environmental in rayon operations.

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The rayon plant 2,000 metric tons

1 on St. John plastics plant

what issues are to be addressed on the environmental impact statement for the rayon operations.

The environmental impact statement likely will take at least one year to complete, said Norm Thomas of EPA's Dallas office. Thomas mediated the hearing.

Formosa and parish officials are confident the EPA will grant the company's permit.

A contingent of Formosa company executives, some of them from the company's Taiwan office, and nine officials of St. John and St. James parishes

praised the plant as a source of relief from St. John's economic doldrums.

"There'll be some good things in St. John for a change," said Councilman Haston Lewis, who has represented the west bank of the parish since 1976. "We need work over here. We want to see kids that's away come back home."

But opponents countered with charges that Formosa has incurred the wrath of environmental officials in Delaware and Texas, and isn't likely to run an environmentally conscious St. John plant.

Also, they said, the presence of a large

chemical plant along the River Road would crush the tourism industry of the old plantation homes in the area, particularly Evergreen, which borders the proposed plant on the east.

The hearing became a duel of one-upmanship, as supporters of each side clapped when they thought a point had been scored in their favor.

"Our forefathers ate their meat, raw. We cook it," said Pat Sellers, a St. John businessman who said technology con-

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tinues to make chemical plants safer.

But, said James Coleman Sr., an attorney representing the owner of Evergreen Plantation, "Once this plant is constructed Evergreen is worthless as a residence. . . . Evergreen comes out of operation."

Carol Waguespack, a St. James Parish housewife, asked EPA officials to consider the area's high colon and bladder cancer rates in evaluating Formosa's permit application.

Formosa officials said the rayon plant would produce 800 construction jobs for a two-year period and 1,000 permanent jobs.

The rayon plant would produce 2,000 metric tons of rayon per

day, 300 metric tons of rayon staple fiber per day, and 215 metric tons of sodium sulphate per day, according to a company news release.

"We are blessed to have Formosa or any other industry come to Louisiana," said Henry Brock, a St. James Parish School Board member. "This is not an ammunition plant."

Opponents, however, say the plant will pollute the air and water. They also have criticized the nearly \$30 million in state and parish tax abatements the company has been promised.

Soon after the St. John council's rezoning, the environmental group Save Our Wetlands filed suit against councilmen and Parish President Lester Millet, charging they had abused their power.