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RIVER PA

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Witnesses: No expert stud

By **BOB WARREN**
River Parishes bureau

Parish officials did not use land use or traffic studies by experts when rezoning 1,800 acres of land in St. John the Baptist Parish last year to accommodate the proposed Formosa Plastics Corp. plant.

Instead, they relied on information from the parish's zoning

administrator and on public comments during three hearings, three parish councilmen testified Wednesday in state court in Edgard as the Formosa zoning trial got under way.

A fourth official testified in a deposition that he, too, was unaware of any expert studies on how the rezoning might affect the surrounding communities and parish.

The testimony came as parish

officials defended the Parish Council's April 1990 decision to rezone land for a \$700 million rayon plant.

The environmental group Save Our Wetlands sued parish councilmen and Parish President Lester Millet Jr., challenging the rezoning in an effort to block the proposed plant.

Formosa, the Taiwanese chemical giant, plans to build its rayon plant, which would be the world's

Secretary Paul Templet said.
"Our new rules disrupt money-

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Thursday, May 23, 1991

Studies on Formosa deal

largest, on the site of the old Whitney Plantation on St. John's west bank.

On Wednesday, Save Our Wetlands' attorney Paul Aucoin tried to paint a picture of ill-informed parish officials making a hasty decision to change the land from agricultural to industrial.

Parish Councilmen Steve Lee, Ranney Wilson and Joel McTopy testified that they thought the rayon plant fit the overall land-

use scheme on the west bank. Each said he received economic impact figures from the Millet administration that showed the plant would bring a bonanza of jobs and tax revenues.

Wilson and Lee voted for the rezoning; McTopy recused himself because of his business dealings with the family that owned the Whitney Plantation before Formosa bought it.

"I felt the upside of the eco-

nom ic impact definitely overshadowed the downside of environmental issues," Lee testified.

Wilson, whose district is in LaPlace and Reserve, on the east bank, said the proposed plant would "bring the west bank up."

"I think it's an inconvenience just to live over here, on the west bank," Wilson testified.

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**'No one says they're
guilty and agree to
the nonli...**

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DEQ



Formosa

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But Aucoin hammered on the data supporting the rezoning decision, and said that no traffic, engineering or environmental studies were performed to show officials what impact their decision would have, and that officials hadn't properly considered the Willowbend industrial site just downriver, an area already zoned for industry.

Aucoin verbally sparred with Mark Howard, St. John's zoning administrator, over Howard's qualifications and interpretations of the parish's zoning ordinance.

Howard had testified that he considered himself an expert, even though he held no academic

degrees in land use studies.

Earlier, Planning and Zoning Commission Chairman Keit Gillies' testimony was accepted into the court record in deposition form because he was unable to attend the trial.

In the deposition, Gillies said there was never talk of any formal, expert study.

"In my three years on the commission, we've never ordered study of anything," he said in the deposition.

As a commissioner, Gillies said, "I have to defer to the people who are experts on the environmental issues, namely the DEQ and EPA."

The trial resumes today at 10 a.m. at the St. John Parish Courthouse in Edgard.