



Matt Anderson for The New York Times

Residents and environmentalists oppose a plan by a Taiwan company to build a rayon plant in Wallace, La., on the Mississippi River. An old plantation house sits on the site that has been bought by the company.

Wallace Journal

A Wariness of Industry Crosses a Racial Divide

By FRANCES FRANK MARCUS

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WALLACE, La. — Along River Road, which meanders for miles through the remnants of

plantation country, the black and white residents have shared little over the years but mutual distrust and a high cancer rate, which many believe is caused by the dozens of industrial plants that line the Mississippi River.

Now they are also sharing a bitter

Along Cancer Alley, opposition to one more plant.

Gov. Buddy Roemer and local politicians. The company has bought 1,740 acres in the Wallace area, including an old rice and sugar plantation called Whitney and its plantation house.

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over the years but mutual distrust and a high cancer rate, which many believe is caused by the dozens of industrial plants that line the Mississippi River.

Now they are also sharing a bitter fight against powerful local political and business interests and a large industrial company from Taiwan, the Formosa Plastics Corporation, which wants to build a \$700 million plant for processing wood pulp and manufacturing rayon in this mostly black community.

Industry was once welcomed to this region, no questions asked, and not even the most ardent opponent of the Formosa Plastics plant denies that the area and the state need jobs. But many people say this fight is another example of new thinking in Louisiana: a stiffening of public attitudes toward industry and the politicians who entice big companies.

"This is really the first time environmental, historic preservation and minority groups have gotten together to protest a plant," said William Fontenot, an environmental specialist with the State Attorney General's office.

Members of the new alliance fear not only the potential chemical discharges from the plant, but also disruption of the community and harm to the tranquil landscape and its historic houses.

"There is great trauma for the people here," said Wilfred M. Greene, a black retired school principal who

A town weighs the environmental and historical cost of industry.

owns riverfront land in Wallace that his ancestors, plantation workers, bought in 1874.

Samuel Jackson, a black 34-year-old former chemical plant worker who has been unemployed for more than a year, said: "We need jobs, that's a fact. But this is more than about jobs."

Mr. Jackson said he did not relish "10 years of making \$15 an hour and then dying of cancer or liver disease or whatever."

Ten miles upriver, Zeb Mayhew, a white administrator and part owner of Oak Alley plantation, said the proposed plant "scars the hell out of me."

River Road, known to tourists for its antebellum plantation houses, is known to medical researchers and the public as Cancer Alley. But the industrial plants that are widely believed to be the cause of high cancer rates have skipped over a fertile, 30-mile-residential and farming strip that includes Wallace.

People say this strip is the last green zone in the 130 river miles between New Orleans and Baton Rouge. It is part of St. John the Baptist Parish, which straddles the Mississippi, and here on the west bank, tumble-down shanties share country lanes with cottages, churches and modern brick homes in a patchwork of sugarcane fields and historic houses.

The Formosa Plastics plan to build here has been avidly supported by

Along Cancer Alley, opposition to one more plant.

Gov. Buddy Roemer and local politicians. The company has bought 1,740 acres in the Wallace area, including an old rice and sugar plantation called Whitney and its plantation house.

The Whitney land, once zoned agricultural and residential, was rezoned for industrial use at a stormy meeting of the Parish Council last year. Opponents of the new plant say they face a formidable political machine: parish officials whose business interests stand to gain from new industry.

A leading backer of the plant is Lester J. Millet Jr., the council president, a white businessman. A descendant of plantation owners, Mr. Millet was the parish tax assessor and sheriff in the 1970's. Among other interests, he owns a motel, a small shopping center and a construction company.

Mr. Millet (pronounced MEE-yah) declined to be interviewed, but he has been quoted as saying he favors the Taiwan project because "thousands of jobs will come behind." The company says the plant will create 700 jobs.

Joel McTopy, a white council member who is health and safety representative for the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers Union, says he worries about the record of Formosa Plastics.

Last year the E.P.A. proposed a fine of \$8.3 million against the company for violations of waste laws at a chemical plant in Texas. In a recent settlement, the company agreed to pay \$3,375,000. Last year it also agreed to pay a \$65,000 fine for air pollution in Baton Rouge, where it has a chemical plant.

The company has asked the Environmental Protection Agency for a permit to discharge 53 million gallons of waste water a day, mostly into the Mississippi. A spokesman said the company planned to use the most modern pollution-fighting equipment available.

Carl Baloney Sr. is familiar with mortality in the region, as co-owner of two St. John Parish funeral homes. "Eight out of 10 people we bury probably have cancer," Mr. Baloney said. "Most of the deaths are cancer related."

Last year Mr. Baloney, who is black, was an outspoken opponent of the new plant, but he has been quiet lately. He said his brother, who operates the only ambulance service in the parish, is a contender for a new parish ambulance contract. "The seeds were planted somewhere and it has been passed around the parish that 'Carl is hurting his brother's chances of getting the ambulance contract,'" Mr. Baloney said.

Mr. Greene, the waterfront property owner, said Formosa Plastics has approached him about buying part of his land. On a walk through the neighborhood, a strip of modest houses beside the levee, he said some neighbors have sold to the company but he wants neither to sell nor live with Formosa Plastics. "I am 68 years old," he said. "For me to move out now, where would I go?"

Mr. Greene said that in the struggle over the plant something fundamental had changed. "Whatever happens, it will never be business as usual in St. John Parish again," he said. "Politicians here never once dreamed this plant would drum up this much opposition. They will never try this again."