

Idle Series - Picayune

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Opponents of the Formosa rayon plant are astounded that they were able to stop the plant from opening in the middle of Louisiana's chemical corridor. FILE PHOTO

Whitney may be too costly to refurbish, experts say

By **BOB WARREN**
River Parishes bureau

What's next for the Whitney Plantation home? Opinions are divided among some historical preservationists.

Depending on who's talking, the Formosa company's decision to scrap its rayon plant at the plantation site in Wallace, on St. John the Baptist Parish's west bank, is either the best thing to happen to the 200-year-old house, or the worst.

Formosa has pledged to donate the home and the land on which it sits to preservationists with the resources and expertise to renovate it and open it to the public.

But preservationists interviewed Thursday said raising the cash to renovate the once-opu-

"St. John now has the potential to be the focus of cultural tourism," said Eugene Cizek, a Tulane University architecture professor who has studied Whitney and other antebellum homes along the Mississippi River. "But I think enough people know about Whitney so that if Formosa will donate it, they'll raise the money."

Cizek said Formosa's decision not only saves Whitney from an existence at the fence line of smokestacks, but also keeps intact a 15-mile "green belt" of industry-free River Road on the west bank of the Mississippi between Baton Rouge and New Orleans. He said parish and state governments should realize the importance of the plantation homes to Louisiana's tourism industry.

State University cultural anthropologist who also has studied the Whitney house and property, is skeptical.

"I am very pessimistic about our ability to find funding," Edwards said. "It's very disappointing to me that Louisiana is going to lose what could have been a wonderful resource."

In the summer of 1991 Formosa had given LSU a \$180,000 grant to develop plans to preserve the house. Edwards and others who worked on the study suggested turning the plantation into a museum of Louisiana's French Creole plantation cultures, including the oft-forgotten roles of African and West Indian slaves who labored on the plantations.

More elaborate plans included a restaurant, visitor's center and shop.

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