

Formosa zoning goes before judge

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The battle over the Formosa Plastics Corp. plant proposed for the west bank of St. John the Baptist Parish moves into the courtroom today when elected officials defend their decision to rezone 1,700 acres for the plant.

At issue: Did parish officials act outside their authority last year in rezoning the old Whitney Plantation in Wallace from residential to industrial?

Environmentalists, under the name Save Our Wetlands, say they did. The group sued all nine parish councilmen and Parish President Lester Millet Jr.

The group says Willow Bend, just downriver from Whitney, is a more suitable site for Formosa Plastics. Willow Bend, owned by Shell, already was zoned for heavy industry.

The trial is scheduled to begin at 9:30 a.m. in state court in Edgard before ad hoc Judge Remy Chaisson. It's expected to last three days.

The plant has become a white-hot issue in the heavily industrialized area.

Formosa Plastics, based in

Taiwan, wants to build a \$700 million rayon plant, the world's largest, on the site of the Whitney Plantation.

Proponents, who include most parish officials, say the rayon plant will provide jobs for the impoverished west bank.

Opponents, who include environmental advocates and preservationists, say the plant will foul the air and water and destroy valuable historical sites.

Parish officials appear confident they will prevail. They point to a similar lawsuit filed by a group challenging the rezoning of 435 acres in Garyville, on the east bank, for the proposed Aristech Chemical Corp. plant.

Last October, a judge ruled in favor of parish officials in the Aristech suit, saying the rezoning process was followed correctly.

But Luke Fontana, co-counsel for Save Our Wetlands, said he "feels pretty confident about it all."

"The law as we read it is that they shouldn't have rezoned it to heavy industrial without basing the decision on an adequate environmental study," Fontana said. "I think what the St. John Council did was wrong."