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**HUFF POST GREEN**

## Beleaguered Plaquemines Town Is Slated for a Borrow Pit

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The Plaquemines Parish Council gave the go-ahead Thursday to Woodland Borrow Pits, LLC in New Orleans to excavate clay on Highway 23's west side across from the African American community of Ironton. Neighbors worry about health and environmental impacts from the pit, which should be big at a maximum 18.9 million bank cubic yards. And they oppose the plan of another company, RAM Terminals, LLC, to build a coal facility just north of town.

The Council's 6-to-3 decision in favor of Woodland followed the group's 5-to-3 vote, with one absent, against the pit in October. Woodland filed two lawsuits last winter challenging the first decision.

Woodland appears to be on its way to digging up the site's clay, which would be used for levees. "We issued a permit for the Woodland borrow pit project and just recently modified the permit," U.S. Army Corps of Engineers spokesman Ricky Boyett in New Orleans said Thursday. "One of the conditions is that the applicant must obtain all required state and local permits before work can begin."

Ironton residents and the Christian Ministers Missionary Baptist Association of Plaquemines have opposed the pit. Ironton is surrounded by a CHS grain elevator, a Phillips 66 refinery to the north in Alliance and two coal terminals nearby, while RAM plans to build a coal facility just above town. Reverend Joseph Brooks, pastor of Greater Morning Star Baptist Church in Naomi, said last week. "A borrow pit would be yet another health hazard," he said. "Residents, particularly children and the elderly, are already threatened by this concentration of industry." Respiratory ailments are common in the area.

Dating to the late 1800s, Ironton is the oldest African American settlement on the West Bank of the Mississippi River in Plaquemines. Residents have tried to keep industry at bay. "My parents and grandparents grew up there," Brooks said. "My ancestors were there before they had zoning laws. The authorities have no regard for health or human life in Ironton because it's a minority community." Two years ago the parish council prevented a Walmart from locating in Belle Chasse but it can't stop the borrow pit, he said.

The area along the Mississippi River next to Ironton is industrially and agriculturally zoned, according to Plaquemines Parish economic development director Stan Mathes. The community of Ironton is residentially zoned.

Rose Jackson, a board member of the Louisiana Environmental Action Network or LEAN in Baton Rouge, said the area shouldn't have a borrow pit because its land is subsiding or sinking. "I grew up in Ironton, and in hurricanes we only had moderate flooding," she said last week. "But in the last decade, any hurricane or tropical storm causes severe flooding, with water entering homes." One of the issues raised with the parish council by a resident last fall is that the borrow pit could cause drainage problems on adjacent land.

Residents also told the council last fall they were worried about airborne particulates, mosquitoes, garbage and road congestion from the pit. Louisiana Highway 23, the way into Ironton, could become full of trucks.

Jackson said a woman with the Army Corps told her the agency doesn't even need borrow material from the site. And when the Parish Council met on a proposed moratorium on new borrow pits last October 10, it received an Army Corps statement saying that existing borrow pits already met the needs of federal and non-federal levee projects in the parish.

"The statement provided by the Corps last fall is still accurate in that sufficient borrow has been identified for levee projects," Boyett of the Army Corps said last Thursday.

But Jean-Paul Layrisson of Scandurro & Layrisson, LLC in New Orleans, an attorney for the borrow pit company, said an Army Corps document given to the parish council this spring indicated that supplies of processed borrow pit material in Plaquemines could prove inadequate and might drive up levee construction costs. The Corps is raising levees in the parish, and in some spots replacing them, for hurricane protection.

Woodland Borrow Pits has the required Army Corps permits for the area across from Ironton, Layrisson said. "We told the parish council we won't move for additional borrow pits on the property, and we won't move to make it a landfill," he also said. Thursday's

settlement between the company and the parish ends uncertain and costly litigation and provides needed borrow for public projects, Layrisson said. He believes the settlement will benefit Plaquemines and taxpayers by providing the lowest cost clay for local flood protection. Clay won't have to be brought in from elsewhere.

Meanwhile, the Chitimacha Tribe of Louisiana has told the Army Corps that the borrow site across from Ironton is part of its aboriginal homelands. If any aboriginal materials are found, they must be reported to the Corps and to the tribe in Charenton, La.

As for the RAM terminal, "it's moving forward, and it's going to happen," Plaquemines Parish President Billy Nungesser predicted last week. The state's Dept. of Natural Resources approved a coastal use permit for RAM last August but the company is waiting for a Clean Water Act Section 404 permit from the Army Corps.

"At this time, we don't have an approved wetland mitigation plan in place for the RAM terminal so a final decision hasn't been made," Boyett of the Corps said Thursday. "Before we can issue a permit, the applicant must have a mitigation plan."

RAM Terminals, which is affiliated with Armstrong Coal Co. in Kentucky, didn't respond to phone calls last week.

Residents from Jefferson Parish down to Ironton worry that uncovered coal trains might be introduced to supply RAM. Nungesser said the Plaquemines Parish master plan supports relocating the New Orleans & Gulf Coast Railway, or NOGC line, away from Belle Chasse--the largest town in the parish. The line would be moved as part of a Peters Road expansion project that got under way two years ago. Extending the rail line further south in Plaquemines is also envisioned.

The 32-mile NOGC freight line extends from Westwego to Gouldsboro Yard in Gretna in Jefferson Parish down to the CHS grain elevator in Plaquemines. It parallels Belle Chasse Highway. Users include oil and petrochemical companies, in addition to CHS. Up to three trains use the rail line a day in Plaquemines, traveling 10 to 15 miles an hour, according to a 2012 master plan drawn up by the parish. As of 2012, the railroad operated at less than 10 percent of capacity in Plaquemines. But many rail crossings in Plaquemines weren't properly equipped with gates and warning devices, the parish said then.

The Clean Gulf Commerce Coalition held a public meeting last Tuesday at the Gretna Community Center about the possibility of coal trains starting there for trips to Plaquemines. The coalition includes LEAN, the Sierra Club, Gulf Restoration Network and Lower Mississippi Riverkeeper.

"Gretna is doing its due diligence to see what coal trains heading to RAM's planned terminal would mean for us," Gretna Mayor Belinda Constant said last week. Gretna is involved because train cars are stored in the Gouldsboro Yard in her city. Trains travel on tracks on Gretna's streets now. "We've had no control over the railroad because of federal right-of-way laws," Constant said. "But I'm working with parish and state officials to get the rail rerouted away from Gretna eventually."

Rose Jackson predicted property values in Ironton, which has longtime home owners, will decline because of the RAM terminal, the borrow pit, other industrial sites nearby and coal trains someday passing through the area.

Ironton and vicinity dodged a bullet in the late 1960s when Louisiana Power & Light Co., a forerunner of Entergy Corp., considered the site where RAM plans to build its coal terminal for a nuclear power plant. The power company located its plant in St. Charles Parish instead, Stan Mathes said. end