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St. Tammany Parish Council approves waste transfer station north of Covington

by Charlie Chapple, The Times-Picayune
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The St. Tammany Parish Council on Thursday night approved a zoning permit for IESI Corp. to build and operate a solid waste transfer station north of Covington, despite opposition from scores of residents.

The council voted 8-5 with one abstention not to reverse a Jan. 6 Zoning Commission decision to grant the conditional-use permit sought by the company for 11 acres in an industrial park along Louisiana 25 near Hard Hat Drive.

Councilman Gary Cooper, whose district includes the area, fell short in his motion to override the commission's approval. Voting with him were James "Red" Thompson, Reid Falconer, Marty Dean and Henry Billiot. Al Hamauei abstained.

Residents argued that the station will lower property values and create noise, traffic, odor and environmental problems. Through the North West St. Tammany Civic Association, they said the station will be incompatible with an area that has hundreds of homes, a scenic stream and St. Joseph Abbey and Seminary College.

Association attorney Alex Peragine urged the council to follow parish zoning laws, which prohibit conditional uses that devalue surrounding and nearby properties. There's no doubt the station will harm the value of neighboring properties, he said.

The owners of an adjacent 65-acre industrial park also objected to the permit. Ted Dittmer, attorney for Covington Industrial Park, said 14 businesses in the park and five others nearby all oppose the project. Approving the waste transfer station would hinder future development of the park and the multimillion-dollar expansion plans of businesses already there, he said.

Abbot Justin Brown noted that the transfer station is only 2,000 feet from the abbey. The station "will adversely affect our historic abbey and the many people who benefit from what we offer the community," he said.

But IESI attorney Jeff Schoen pointed to two stations on Louisiana 59 south of the Abita Springs. He said those stations have not harmed adjacent properties. "There's been an explosion of industrial and commercial development within a quarter-mile of those facilities," Schoen said.

Council members, who essentially voted to approve the permit, agreed with Schoen. Steve Stefancik said he rides his bicycle on the Tammany Trace near the two Louisiana 59 stations, "and I've never experienced smell like everyone says we're going to have."

Council Chairman Jerry Binder said he lives in Slidell within a mile of a transfer station that is also near two churches, four schools and many homes and businesses. "I got to be honest with you, I don't smell it," Binder said.

Councilman Richie Artigue said he lives near the same transfer station and noted that Delgado Community College has a campus "within 50 yards of the facility. . . . I don't see anybody with

masks on."

At a transfer station, garbage trucks drive up a ramp into a building to dump their loads onto larger trucks for disposal outside the parish. No garbage hits the ground, Schoen emphasized, and the facility will be used only by six trucks belonging to Coastal Waste Services, a garbage company owned by IESI.

The council's decision was a blow to the many residents who have been fighting the station through the civic association since August, when IESI began building the transfer station using a conditional use permit originally issued to Southeast Investments more than two years ago.

Southeast Investments, owned by Slidell businessman Chris Jean, got the permit extended a year ago, five weeks after IESI acquired the 11-acre site for the transfer station. Jean also is the former owner of Coastal Waste.

The association sued the parish in September. And a state judge in October voided the zoning permit and other parish permits granted for the facility partly because Southeast Investment no longer owned it.

The approval of the initial permit and its extension were done without opposition from residents, who said they were unaware of the project.

But when construction began in August, residents mounted a full-fledged fight to stop the project. After the association's court victory, IESI filed a new application for the zoning permit that was upheld Thursday night.

Association president Bruce Nesbitt said residents will regroup and decide what to do next.

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