

Landfill expansion looms over Slidell

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Ah, scenic St. Tammany Parish.

The tall, majestic pines swaying in the breeze. The waters of Lake Pontchartrain gently lapping on the shoreline, as pelicans glide gracefully overhead. The 125-foot-tall mountain of trash towering over the lush wetlands and golf course neighborhoods.

Whoa. Now there's an image you won't find in the tourist brochures.

It will be hard to miss, though, for anyone coming off the Interstate 10 twin spans from New Orleans heading into Slidell. It certainly isn't what most residents in and around south Slidell, including those in toney nearby subdivisions such as Oak Harbor, Eden Isles and Lakeshore Estates, had in mind when they settled there.

But it's on its way, unless residents and their elected officials can convince the state Department of Environmental Quality to reject the Slidell Landfill's expansion plans.

The company wants to expand its dump site for demolition and construction debris north of Lakeshore Estates and the fancy new Northshore Harbor Center.

Six years ago, it obtained a state permit to operate two disposal pits within the 68-acre tract it owns. The pits have been overrun with debris generated by Hurricane Katrina and are nearing capacity, according to company attorney John King.

Slidell Landfill is asking the state to let it combine the two pits with another 20½-acre section, creating a single, 48-acre landfill. The company wants permission to increase the height of the dump site in a gradual sloping manner to 125 feet at the center, according to documents it filed with DEQ in Baton Rouge.

Forget the pine trees and the pelicans. This landfill would become the dominant physical feature on the Slidell area's landscape.

Following its standard procedure, DEQ officials held a public hearing in Slidell on Aug. 17 and invited written comments on the company's permit request. Few locals turned out at the hearing, few letters were sent to DEQ and by the end of August it appeared as though the landfill was on its way to getting its state permit.

Better late than never, area residents took notice just a few weeks ago and mounted a feverish letter-writing campaign, hoping to dissuade DEQ from approving the project.

To that end, the Parish Council member who represents the area has called a public meeting for today at 10

a.m. at the Northshore Harbor Center to discuss the permit request. State environmental officials and state legislators are expected to attend, along with representatives of Slidell Landfill, headed by Chris Jean.

Jean has succeeded in currying both political stroke and public favor in recent years, in the tradition of his late father-in-law, Johnny Smith, who became a behind-the-scenes political force in St. Tammany Parish while building up a trucking, garbage hauling and waste disposal empire.

Just this month, Jean announced he would develop a 212-lot subdivision north of Slidell and then sell all the homesites to East St. Tammany Habitat for Humanity at his cost.

Even that level of good will, though, isn't likely to win over residents who are working themselves into a frenzy over the prospect of a 12-story Mount Katrina going up in their back yards.

Jean doesn't need to win over the public, however -- just DEQ. And so far, he has done everything he should have to demonstrate to the state that his project is both necessary and viable. What's lacking in his pitch to the state is an accurate representation of just how offensive such a project at that gateway to Slidell would be to the tens of thousands of people living in and around St. Tammany Parish's largest city.

Residents who show up today to complain about the project are sure to do plenty of hooting and hollering. They would do well, though, to pay attention to which of their elected representatives straddle the fence on this issue and which have the fortitude to actually take a position.

It would be a convenient, but shameful, cop-out for parish leaders and St. Tammany's legislative delegation to wash their hands of the matter and say it's the state's decision to make. A united front by officials in St. Tammany would carry lots of weight with DEQ as it ponders the permit request. Likewise, their silence would speak volumes.

How many of St. Tammany's elected officials will find it within themselves to stand up to the Slidell Landfill project, tell DEQ they think this is a bad idea and offer to work with their friend Chris Jean and his team to find another, less offensive solution? We'll start finding out this morning.

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