



Everything New Orleans

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Will abbey get a trashy new neighbor?

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When we can get up in time, we like to attend the early Mass on Sunday mornings at St. Joseph Abbey.

It's a surprisingly short drive from our Covington neighborhood, past the Winn-Dixie and the Walgreens and the fast food restaurants, to the Old World setting of the monastery and seminary. Five minutes is all it takes to transport us from the cluttered suburbia of U.S. 190 to the utter tranquility tucked behind River Road's old-growth pines and a one-lane bridge spanning the Bogue Falaya River.

Arriving about 7 a.m., we invariably find a light mist arising from the pond as we park the car. The occasional honk of a resident goose tends to add to the setting's serenity, not detract from it, as we make the short walk across the dewy lawn to the church.

With every visit, I am reminded that the abbey, like the Mandeville lakefront, is one of the genuine, accessible treasures of St. Tammany Parish.

I shudder now to think that the reverential peace and quiet that have been hallmarks of the abbey grounds for 120 years could be threatened by an encroaching industrial site -- an enterprise both obnoxious and downright noxious.

IESI Corp. is building a solid waste transfer station on 11 acres along Louisiana 25 -- and less than a mile from the abbey. The St. Tammany Parish Zoning Commission this week approved a zoning permit for the operation.

Residents along River Road and elsewhere near the site have been arguing for months that the facility will lower property values and create noise, traffic, odors and environmental problems. Three months ago, they convinced a state judge in Covington to void the initial zoning permit for the project on a series of technicalities.

The parish zoning board voted 6-4 Tuesday night to issue a new one.

As St. Tammany grows, so does the amount of garbage generated by its residents. What to do with it is an ongoing problem. Of course, no one wants to live near a dump or any other site involved in the process.

At a transfer station, garbage trucks drive up a ramp into a building to dump their loads of refuse into larger trucks that will deliver the garbage to a landfill.

The IESI facility will be operated "in a first-class manner" and have no impact on the surrounding community, company attorney Jeff Schoen told the zoning board. Only six trucks will use the site and no garbage will reach the ground, Schoen said.

The many area residents who filled the meeting room Tuesday night were not convinced.

"It's not a question of if there will be a negative impact," University of New Orleans professor Ivan Miestchovich Jr. suggested to the zoning board on their behalf, but how far that impact would extend.

St. Tammany has two waste transfer stations, near Slidell and Abita Springs. Zoning commissioner John Sammons said he recently toured them both and didn't find anything offensive in the way they operate.

On the other hand, commissioner Martha Cazaubon warned, "The fear is real that it is going to change this

area . . . and I just don't think it's appropriate for this area."

Residents who opposed the zoning permit said they would appeal this week's decision to the Parish Council next month.

They've got their work cut out for them. The garbage and trash hauling and disposal industry is on the short list of interests most friendly with the parish government. Meanwhile, Councilman Gary Cooper, who represents the area and opposes the transfer station, just took office a year ago this week, and while his determination is unquestioned, it's unclear whether he has enough stroke yet to prod his colleagues to overturn the ruling.

When the issue comes up, let's hope that council members consider the issue from all perspectives. The one that can be appreciated on a misty morning at St. Joseph Abbey might be a good place to start.

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