Ascension Parish: our neighbor to the south

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GONZALES - Country living with easy access to the big city is drawing scores of new residents to this Ascension Parish community.

The petrochemical plants here still offer quiet rural lifestyles in spite of the area's rapid growth and Baton Rouge's urban sprawl.

The average annual income of Ascension Parish communities is sprouting up all over the Gonzales area, and homeowners who prefer a laid-back way of life in a little bit of the big city are seeing a welcome分流.

Gonzales' growth has sparked a corresponding increase in business development, and many new retail outlets and service centers, including health-care and financial centers, motels and restaurants, have opened or are under construction.

The rapid growth has also created many new problems which city and parish officials are trying to alleviate.

Gonzales is a small town, in a tight-knit community of about 4,500 people, and many thousands more live in unincorporated communities nearby including Prairieville, Dutchtown, Galvez and St. Amant.

The area is located about 20 miles south of Baton Rouge via Interstate 10 or U. S. 61 (Airline Highway) near the heart of Louisiana's "chemical corridor," the vast string of petrochemical manufacturing and processing plants which dot the Mississippi River between Baton Rouge and New Orleans.

Chemical manufacturing plants, petroleum refiners and the service companies which maintain the petrochemical industry are principal employers for area residents.

State- and federally-supported institutions, including the Hunt Correctional Center and the Louisiana Technical Institute for Women, the LSU Agricultural Experiment Station and the National Hansen's Disease Center at Carville -- the only surviving leprosy patient in the U. S. Public Health Service Hospital -- are major employers in St. Gabriel, which is located in Iberville Parish less than 10 miles west of Gonzales and just 15 miles south of Baton Rouge.

Dozens of national and international companies have invested millions of dollars in petrochemical plants and refiners nearby Gonzales and St. Gabriel.

Most of the plants are located on valuable riverfront property which gives them access to ocean-going ships or inexpensive barge transportation for their products.

The vast industrial growth has helped to transform rural areas south of Baton Rouge into one of the state's fastest growing residential communities.

Major industrial employers include international chemical manufacturers such as BASF Wyandotte Corp., Ciba-Geigy Corp., and Stauffer Chemical Co.

The nation's leading chemical and petroleum producers operate facilities along the river in St. Gabriel, Geismar, Buraside, Convent and other communities. The companies include Shell, Texaco, Gulf, Shell, Texaco, Vulcan, Rubicon, Monochem and Dupont.

Industrial expansion has sparked an increase in the area's commercial development. Gonzales boasts five

Three banks and several other financial institutions serve Gonzales and outlying areas. Several new banks and other financial institutions have opened their doors in recent months.

The parish's governing body, the Police Jury, is implementing a new municipal numbering system in the rapidly growing rural areas. The new system should be complete next year.

The new addressing system will replace the antiquated rural route system and will help public and private agencies locate homes and businesses in outlying areas.

The Police Jury operates a tax-supported ambulance service in Gonzales and surrounding areas.

Most parish governmental services are housed in the Courthouse annex in Gonzales although principal offices are in the central Courthouse in Donaldsonville, the seat of parish government which is about 20 miles away via the Sun Bridge on the west side of the Mississippi River.

Sheriff Harold Tridico, Clerk of Court Kermit "Hart" Bourque, Assessor Gerald M. McCreary and Registrar of Voters Robert Poche maintain branch offices in the Gonzales annex. The Police Jury, county agent and the parish's ambulance service also maintains offices in the annex building.

A modern library, a federally funded center for the elderly and a recreation center, which was expanded in 1983 to accommodate gatherings of up to 700 people, also are located in Gonzales.

A year-round, city-sponsored recreation program features arts and crafts and dancing classes at the recreation center. The Gonzales Tourism Commission maintains a popular museum in the old train station and several antebellum plantation mansions and cottages, including House House, Tezeco and Belle Helene, contribute to the area's tourist industry.

Several shopping centers are located in Gonzales and provide residents with retail outlets for clothing, gardening hardware and other goods.

The east side is served by the 3,500 residents of eastern Iberville Parish receive their electricity from GUS, which operates the massive Willow Glen power generating station in St. Gabriel. Water service is provided by Waterworks District No. 1, a public water provider.

The tax-supported Fire District No. 1, which is staffed by a large team of well-trained volunteers, provides fire protection in the St. Gabriel area, and the parish's sheriff's office, which operates a station in St. Gabriel, provides law enforcement and an ambulance service.

The St. Gabriel area is served by several schools, including Sunshine High School, as well as a branch of the parish library system.

Government offices are housed in the Courthouse in Plaquemine on the west side of the river. A city-owned ferry crossing carries passengers and their vehicles between Sunshine and Plaquemine daily.

Work is under way on two new elementary schools in the Galvez and Galvez-St. Amant areas, as well as major classroom additions to St. Amant High School, Gonzales Primary and many other schools.

The school bonds will be retired over a 15-year period with revenues from a new 18-cent ad valorem tax.

City and parish officials have turned their attentions to several nagging problems which could stunt development, including poor drainage, the absence of zoning in rural areas and the lack of a parishwide building code.

Voters last year approved a new one-half cent sales tax and use tax for the parish's east side to pay for a massive flood-control project to stop periodic floods which have caused an estimated $80 million in damages to homes, businesses and farms since 1977. The improvements are being performed by the Ascension Drainage District, an arm of the Police Jury.

The Police Jury already collects a parishwide one-cent sales tax, and the School Board collects a two-cent tax.

The Police Jury has discussed the need for a parishwide building code to protect homeowners from unsafe or poorly constructed buildings. The parish already has a parishwide fire code.

Garbage collection is a tax-supported service in Gonzales, but rural areas have no public garbage service and residents are forced to rely on private haulers.

Parish officials have promulgated new rules to stop rural homeowners from pumping raw sewage into open drainage ditches. The rules require proof that sewage treatment facilities meet state health specifications before power can be connected to new homes and businesses.

The Police Jury recently adopted a list of regulations for mobile home parks in rural areas. The new rules control the size of parks, sanitation, access roads and other matters.

The East Ascension General Hospital, a 50-bed, tax-supported facility on the east side of Ascension Parish. The hospital's board of directors has initiated a multi-million improvement and expansion project to improve services.

A California-based health-care company, American Medical International, is building the new 150- bed Riverview Medical Center on La. 30 in Gonzales alongside a 50,000-square-foot medical office building.

The intersection of La. 30 and I-10 has become the hub of commercial development in Gonzales, with the opening in 1984 of a 105-room Holiday Inn and two other motels, several restaurants and other new facilities. In addition, a new bowling alley, Cajun Lanes, is planned for the area.

A staff of 31 police officers, including a two-man detective bureau, provides law enforcement in Gonzales. Eight volunteer fire departments provide fire protection in Gonzales and the parish's east side.

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