Delcambre lies in 2 parishes
... and therein lies the rub

By C. RICHARD COTTON
Special to The Advocate

DELCAMBRE — As he mowed his lawn, Mervin LeBlanc crosses back and forth from Iberia Parish to Vermilion Parish.

When Josephine R. Comeaux leaves her back door to pick butterbeans from the garden on the east side of her lot, she walks from Vermilion Parish into Iberia Parish.

Delcambre is split by the parish boundary, a straight line tangled in controversy.

Some Delcambre residents want to move the parish line to the east or to the west and place the town of 2,069 people wholly in one parish or the other.

In a recent survey mailed to 800 Delcambre-area households, 171 of 273, or 63 percent of Delcambre respondents, want to be in Iberia Parish.

Neither the 67-year-old LeBlanc, who lives in New Iberia and frequently drives the 10 miles to mow his lot at the corner of Bourque and Hickman streets, nor Comeaux, 82, who has resided at the corner of Charity and Bourque since 1938, knew their lots were bisected until they were shown on a map a few weeks ago.

"I chose Iberia Parish, I'd rather stay here," said Comeaux. She and LeBlanc, like many residents, believed the parish line ran down the middle of Railroad Ave., a couple blocks to the west.

Delcambre Mayor Carol Broussard said that residents along the parish line have always had the choice to claim which parish they reside in — and pay property tax in.

Choosing has been an intact science since residents' property didn't have to be crossed by the parish line; they just had to live near it, on one side or the other.

Comeaux said that there is "no particular reason" for her to keep her claim of residency in Iberia Parish except that her grandchild goes to school in one of Delcambre's two schools, both of which are in Vermilion Parish and both of which are funded, operated and staffed by Iberia Parish.

And, that's the reason some people want to move the parish line.

"I'd rather Iberia (Parish) keep the schools up," said Comeaux.

Mayor Carol Broussard points out the parish line that cuts through the heart of Delcambre.

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there is fear in Delcambre that Delcambre High School and Delcambre Elementary School could be closed if the decades-old agreement between Iberia Parish Public Schools and Vermilion Parish Public Schools falls apart.

Some changes, specifically the eventual construction of a new high school in Iberia, could mean an end to Delcambre, and in Vermilion Parish, could upset the status quo.

The Delcambre High School Panthers could become a memorial, said Broussard.

Broussard said he is convinced that a new high school, Vermilion Parish would need the 500 students from Delcambre to become a viable school. Without the 500 students from right around Delcambre — and the state funds they bring with them — who attend the town's schools.

"They've got the town's schools and they've got the kids to build this (new Erath) school," said Broussard, 46, who has served as mayor for seven years. "It all boils down to money."

"If Iberia keeps the schools, they will be open for at least the next 10 years. If Vermilion gets them, they will close within five years. And Vermilion could take them right now."

Delcambre students would likely be bused a couple miles to the new schools, Broussard said. And if it becomes Iberia, they could eventually be bused to New Iberia, a trip of 10 miles that is not a popular option.

"To me,Delcambre students would be welcome in either school system since the schools "had the highest test scores" in each.

"And students mean money to a school district. Iberia Parish receives $5,800 per student per year from the state through the Minimum Foundation Program, Vermilion Parish kicks in another $593 of "tuition" per student each year for Iberia Parish educating Vermilion Parish students. The school building issue is an issue," said Broussard.

"We've been able to cooperate and put the money issue aside to make decisions in the best interest of the students," said Iberia Parish Public Schools Superintendent Eugene "Sonny" Baudry.

"But, "he concedes, "money is an issue."

Baudry said the three possibilities are: 1) the parish line and school situation could stay as is, 2) Delcambre could move wholly into Iberia Parish, or 3) Delcambre could move into Vermilion Parish.

Baudry said a $5 million renovation and technology update for Delcambre High School, approved two years ago, is on hold pending more permanent agreement. There is five-year agreement in effect through 2003, keeping the present student financial arrangement.

"If the parish line changes, it makes our agreement null and void," said Baudry.

"It's an agreement between ourselves," said Vermilion Parish Public Schools Superintendent Dan Darroz. "The whole issue is parochialism."

Darroz said the agreement with Iberia Parish has been in effect since at least the 1940s but "all of a sudden, in the early '90s," the tuition per pupil assessment climbed from $700 to $1,200. Darroz said that was too much, considering "Iberia Parish is getting a lot of MFP funds" because a proportion of the state's industries pay property taxes to keep them to locate there.

"It's welfare for the rich," said Darroz. "Vermilion Parish has invested the high tuition assessments and hammered out the $593 agreement with Iberia Parish."

Vermilion Parish, which Darroz noted is not as affluent as Iberia Parish, will likely see a tax increase next year to help fund the new Erath High School and other school projects.

"And until that's done, everything else is just conjecture," Darroz said.

In order for the parish line to be moved, both parishes would have to agree to let it come to a vote of the people. Then, voters in both parishes must pass it by a two-thirds majority.

"It won't go easy in Iberia Parish," Baudry said, "but it would be a final solution."

And there is one more issue about moving the parish line that has not yet received much attention.

Vermilion Parish sales tax collector Niwya Soileau said that, of the four percent of the revenue portion of Delcambre in Iberia Parish, 1 percent goes to Delcambre, 4 percent to the state and 2.75 percent to Vermilion Parish.

Sunny's Big Breakfast at Country Restaurant, 100 feet inside Vermilion Parish on La. 14, comes with two eggs, hash browns, a biscuit, a choice of ham, bacon or sausage and a cup of coffee. It costs $2.99. "Sunny's Big Breakfast at Country Restaurant, 100 feet inside Vermilion Parish on La. 14, comes with two eggs, hash browns, a biscuit, a choice of ham, bacon or sausage and a cup of coffee. It costs $2.99. "Sunny's Big Breakfast at Country Restaurant, 100 feet inside Vermilion Parish on La. 14, comes with two eggs, hash browns, a biscuit, a choice of ham, bacon or sausage and a cup of coffee. It costs $2.99. "Sunny's Big Breakfast at Country Restaurant, 100 feet inside Vermilion Parish on La. 14, comes with two eggs, hash browns, a biscuit, a choice of ham, bacon or sausage and a cup of coffee. It costs $2.99.

The parish's portion of the tax is 8 cents of that total, but Soileau said the parish collected $12,000 in sales tax from inside the Delcambre town limits for fiscal year 1997-98, the latest figures available. "That $12,000 would not go to Vermilion Parish if the parish line is changed so that all of Delcambre is in Iberia Parish," Soileau said.

The LaSalle Parish school district receives state funds for each juvenile housed at the center.

Press Club of Baton Rouge will not meet today

The Press Club of Baton Rouge will not meet today because of the Independence Day holiday. The next meeting will be July 12.