Norco residents want Shell/Motiva to buy them out

By MIKE DUNNE

When Dorothy Jackson smelled a strong odor in her Norco yard June 19, she took a quick air sample — and found benzene levels almost seven times higher than the state air quality standard.

Residents say air pollution from Shell Chemical and the Shell/Motiva refinery in the St. Charles Parish community threatens their health, and want the companies to buy them out.

Jackson's sample, taken with a plastic bucket transformed into a low-cost air sampler for community groups, showed air in the Diamond community in Norco had 25 parts per billion of benzene. That's close to seven times higher than the state's ambient air standards for benzene, which is 3.6 parts per billion.

The Concerned Citizens of Norco and other groups presented a report Thursday on their air sampling to a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency work group on refinery-community relations, which met in New Orleans.

The predominantly African-American Diamond community sits, like the rest of Norco, between the chemical plant and the refinery.

"We are in a sandwich," said Rosemary Brown, who has lived in Norco for 49 years. "We inhale these chemicals 24-7," meaning 24 hours a day, seven days a week, she said. "It has got to be harming your body."

She and other Diamond residents want Shell to buy them out with enough money to let them purchase a comparable home elsewhere.

T. Allen Kirkley, Motiva Enterprises refinery manager, said emissions from the chemical plant and refinery comply with the limits set in permits and with air quality standards.

He said "virtually every" Norco resident lives within a half mile of either the refinery or the chemical plant.

"The community has grown up between our two plants," he said. "Part of the reason we do not want to get into a relocation game is, where do you stop?"

Motiva — a joint venture of Shell, Texaco and Saudi Aramco — has a long-standing policy of buying out people who live along "one of our fence lines," Kirkley said. Those purchases are based on a fair market value appraisal, he said.

"We have residents along our fence line that are satisfied," he said.

Beverly Wright of Xavier University's Deep South Environmental Justice Center said that, based on self-reported illnesses, "this is a very sick community."

She also said residents suffer psychological "scars" from previous explosions, such as the fatal refinery blast that killed seven people in May 1988.

"The science is not there to prove whether people are being affected or not," she said.

She called for medical studies of the community.

Kirkley said he was unaware of any studies of the community, but said studies of the refinery's workers show they are healthier than the average Louisiana resident.

Percy Hollins, in charge of the "bucket brigade" of people sampling air in Norco, said he has found more than 20 different chemicals that "we are breathing every day."

"What effect has it had on our past and what effect will it have on our future?" Hollins asked. "If we can get out of Norco, it will be a blessing."

Other Norco residents who want buyouts say Shell is not treating them fairly.

Bazile Williams said he has seen buyouts in the white areas of Norco that are much more money than what is being offered in the Diamond community.

Kirkley denied any discrimination, saying some homes have appraised for as low as $20,000, while others reach $70,000, $80,000.

That accounts for differing offers, Kirkley said.

While some people in the community want to move out, others are looking to move in. Kirkley said. A developer is building 53 home sites on the north side of the chemical plant, he said.

Kirkley, who lives in Kenner, said he would not hesitate to live in Norco with children.