River Bend made West Feliciana more prosperous

By KAREN DIDIER
Advocate staff writer

ST. FRANCISVILLE — With its $11.1 million per month payroll having peaked now, Gulf States Utilities' River Bend nuclear power plant has probably had its greatest economic impact on employment for the area.

But the $3.5 billion project also has breathed new life into West Feliciana Parish, bringing new businesses and helping those already there to expand, parish officials said.

The town's fire station and the parish School Board have benefited from the plant's location here, and River Bend also has brought new residents to the area.

At present — and the figures are now beginning to drop from those recorded during peak construction in 1982 and 1983 — salaries for the approximately 3,000 craft union employees at River Bend amount to about $8 million per month, according to GSU officials.

Most of the union members work for Stone & Webster Engineering Co., the firm GSU hired to build the 440-megawatt reactor and generator, and its subcontractors.

Salaries for 2,000 non-union personnel — the engineers, clerical help, technicians and other professionals — total about $3.1 million each month, said GSU spokesman Andy Drehers.

Many of the employees, particularly the union workers, make their homes in West Feliciana and surrounding parishes.

The State Board of Commerce and Industry's Rule No. 1 says to hire as many local personnel and to do business within the state as much as possible, Drehers said, "we've tried to live up to that commitment."

According to figures provided by GSU on craft workers, 400 live in West Feliciana, 300 in East Baton Rouge, 300 in East Feliciana, 200 in Livingston and 100 in Pointe Coupee.

The numbers from each parish have changed over the years as the plant reached different phases of construction. A couple of years ago, more iron workers were on the scene and a great majority of them came from Pointe Coupee Parish, known as an iron workers area, Drehers said.

Today, with 83 percent of the plant complete, more electricians and plumbers are on the job, Drehers said.

"We've also made a conscious effort to work with local companies and to make sure that the contracts are available, he said, "and I think they've bought as much in town as they could.

Several new businesses have been opened in the parish and a new shopping center is now filling its stores with local merchants.

When it (River Bend) first started," Wilcox added, "we only had one place in town to eat. Now we have several restaurants and we have a shopping center and apartments.

Wilcox, who also sells real estate, said that in the past 10 years between 8 and 9 new subdivisions have been developed in the parish, most of them to provide housing for River Bend workers.

Most of the approximate 175 apartments now located in St. Francisville — the parish seat and only incorporated municipality in West Feliciana — are occupied by River Bend employees, and, Wilcox said, there is talk of more apartments being built.

"River Bend has brought in high-caliber people,"" the jury president said. ""They come here to live and they get involved with the community. Some of them even go into politics."

Wilcox said the parish has suffered no great problems because of the nuclear plant, located on a 3,300-acre site about five miles south of St. Francisville.

D'Aquila thinks the town could experience some problems when GSU begins to drop employment to the level needed for plant operation.

Radioactive fuel is expected to be loaded on the plant by April and commercial operation is scheduled to start in December, Drehers said more than 500 workers will be needed to run the plant once it goes on line.

"I'm very concerned about what's going to happen when River Bend stops construction and all these folks leave,"" D'Aquila said.

He said the town has toughened its planning and zoning codes to make sure apartments are constructed correctly and, hopefully, to prevent apartments from taking over the town of fewer than 2,000 residents.

The town's fire department also has benefitted, sort of as a by-product of the nuclear plant, Drehers said.

Although the board has committed $300,000 to salaries, supplemental pay is only close to $1 million per year, Hall said. Teacher salaries have been raised to some of the highest in the state and the pay of all other employees also has been substantially raised.

The board has between $6 million and $7 million in surplus funds.

"At some point in the future there's going to have to be a final tally," Hall said, "but we've never seen where all the money was spent."

One of the problems in collecting the sales and use tax has been with out-of-parish vendors or subcontractors, who come in, do business and then leave, without notifying parish authorities of the exchange and paying the proper tax, Hal said.

Some discrepancies also have occurred when materials were bought or stored elsewhere and then used in West Feliciana, Hall said, noting that...