Sorrento's survival in question

raffle travels past a Sorrento corporate limit sign along La. 22.

Officials look for solutions

BY BRETH. MCCORMICK
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SORRENTO — While nearly everything is growing in Ascension Parish, the little town of Sorrento appears stuck in neutral.

Ascension, one of the fastest-growing parishes in the state, is continuing a 20-year population boom fueled by good schools and industrial expansion. Meanwhile, Sorrento — a community of 1,401 residents on the parish's vibrant east bank — is struggling.

Now there's talk about solving the municipality.

Situated along Interstate 10, Airline Highway and La. 22, Sorrento's location — 30 miles southeast of Baton Rouge — should allow for residential and commercial expansion.

Despite that advantage, the town has been beset by political infighting and a police department plagued by turnover, allegations of impropriety and lawsuits.

Nearly 60 years after a group of residents allied to incorporate the community, some town leaders now say services and quality of life are worse today than they were during the town's beginnings.

The community got its start as a sawmill town in the early 1900s as a stop on a rail line. The name of the town comes from a song, "Come back to Sorrento," that was popular at the time.

Mayor-elect Mike Lambert, who takes office July 1, said he has major concerns about the town's fiscal status.

Sorrento's small tax base is about to get smaller. River Parishes Community College, which opened in the town in 1999, is moving to Gonzales.

And litigation involving the police department could "wipe out" the town's cash reserves, Lambert said. The town recently settled a lawsuit filed by one of its police officers against the Sorrento Police Department and police Chief Earl Theriot, and another suit by an officer is pending.

"Long term, I've got some very serious concerns," Lambert said. "Short term, we've got to see how badly these civil suits are going to affect our
A FedEx delivery vehicle exits the River Parishes Community College's campus in Sorrento on Friday. The town will be losing the college to nearby Gonzales.

Today, there are no town parks, no recreation and few services. Two of the town's most well-known events — the Boucherie Festival and the fire department's annual trail ride — are no longer held.

Melancon, nevertheless, said she's not sold on the idea of dissolving the town. The biggest issue, she said, is the town's low property tax rate. The average property tax rate in Sorrento is 60.7 mills. In the parish, that figure is 107 mills, according to the parish Assessor's Office. With no town, the property owners in Sorrento would pay the parish tax. On a $200,000 home with homestead exemption, the difference would be almost $600 per year.

The parish already assists the town when possible, especially with major drainage projects. Kent Schexnaydre, the parish councilman who represents the Sorrento area, said the parish recently donated a surplus dump truck for the town to use and has helped overlay streets.

Lambert is a believer in Sorrento's potential, though. There's room for growth along La. 22, and he said the growth will come to Sorrento "in spite of itself."

"Because of the financial situation of the town, we go as far as we can legally to assist them," said Schexnaydre, who wouldn't comment on whether or not the town should remain incorporated.

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Mike Eades, chief executive officer and president of the Sorrento-based Ascension Economic Development Corp., which works on economic development projects for parish and municipal governments, said that while there are smaller tracts available for future business development, the town is hindered by both wetlands and the lack of larger properties.

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