Texas Brine Co. contractors try on Wednesday to unclog a passive vent well at bubble site No. 5 along Grand Bayou. The vent, which is designed to ease the flow of methane gas from the bubble site's underground gas source, had been clogged for some time. Bubble sites preceded the appearance of the sinkhole, which emerged in nearby cypress swamp some time late on Aug. 2, 2012, or early on Aug. 3, 2012. More than 100 bubble sites like this one have been discovered and more than 30 remain active, parish officials said.

Sinkhole shows stabilizing; officials not ready to give all clear

BY DAVID J. MITCHELL
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BAYOU CORNE — Pat and Jim Parks finally have their new beginning within sight.

Two years after the sinkhole opened up in the swamp southeast of their riverside home in Bayou Corne, the Parks family plans to start over, purchasing a lot on a small pond in Walker. The only holdup is a settlement from a federal class-action lawsuit, money they need to build a new house.

For Jim Parks, 79, who retired to Bayou Corne with his wife after spending most of their lives in Baton Rouge, the time cannot pass soon enough.

They have spent the two-year hiatus from Bayou Corne in a cramped recreational vehicle parked behind their church in Pierre Part. It's been a time of change and growth for all the Parks family members. Jim has been busy working in his woodshop and building a new home.

They are waiting for the court's decision on the settlement, which is expected to be finalized soon. Once the settlement is paid, the Parks family will be able to move forward with their plans to build a new home.

"We've given up our Christmases. We've given up our New Year's. We've given up all of our holidays, and this is going to be the third year, Christmas with our family, like we've always had," Jim Parks said.

What is now a 32-acre lake like sinkhole was first discovered two years ago Sunday, swallowing an acre of cypress trees. In the intervening years, it has become increasingly clear the small residential community on Bayou Corne will never be the same. Once a mix of campers, retirees, and young families, it's a much quieter place these days.

Damaged family holidays once spent on the Parkses' spacious grounds.

"We've given up our Christmas. We've given up our New Year's. We've given up all of our holidays, and this is going to be the third time, and we were hoping we would be able to build our house and have at least the third year, Christmas with our family, like we've always had," Jim Parks said.

What is now a 32-acre lake like sinkhole was first discovered two years ago Sunday, swallowing about an acre of cypress trees. In the intervening years, it has become increasingly clear the small residential community, Bayou Corne will never be the same. Once a mix of campers, retirees, and young families, it's a much quieter place these days.

Far fewer visible signs of a

See SINKHOLE, page 4A
Looking north from an old containment levee, the 32-acre Assumption Parish sinkhole spreads out like a lake surrounded by cypress swamp July 30. Texas Brine Co. contractors had to build a new levee farther south after the sinkhole began widening.

**SINKHOLE**
Continued from page 3A

community life remain. While people still fish the bayous, gone are the golf carts and walkers out on the streets. In spots, high grass grows on uncut yards.

A wave of buyouts last year by Texas Brine Co., the company some scientists blame for the sinkhole, has led to the departure of 66 property owners.

The Parks are among the next wave planning to leave through the class-action. A fairness hearing has been set for 10 a.m. Aug. 13 before U.S. Judge Jody C. Finley in New Orleans. He will hear any objections to the $482.2 million settlement with Texas Brine.

Lawrence J. Centola III, one of the lead plaintiffs' attorneys, said that if Finley grants final approval — there have been no objections filed — that would set the stage for money to flow by the end of the year.

“The settlement is as expected, and the offering majority of people are participating in the settlement. We’ve got very few objections,” Centola said. “We encourage all people to get money by December.”

Payment will be a mixed blessing for Jim Parks and his wife, who are losing the place they loved.

“Unless a person has lived on the bayou, they don’t understand what we’re giving up,” he said.

At the same time, some residents have not taken the direct Texas Brine buyouts and have opted out of the class action, which also requires people to leave their properties. These homeowners — who own an estimated 11 to 15 properties — are pursuing general damages claims against Texas Brine but want to stay.

Bob Deaton, who splits time between homes in Bayou Corne and Baton Rouge, said he and the owners of eight other homes on the bayou side of Sportsman Drive in Bayou Corne are in that number.

The subdivision south of La. 70 South has some of the largest pockets of methane gas, which scientists believe is caused by the formation of the sinkhole.

Deaton, 67, lives next to a bought-out home that has a well wall failure. The well is designed to remove methane, which otherwise could accumulate to dangerous — potentially explosive — levels under home slab and in closets.

Deaton said he thinks the gas threat is low and that he is more likely to be killed driving back and forth to Baton Rouge.

“It boils down to the attitude toward risk,” Deaton said.

He said he will be fine with living in Bayou Corne with just a few residents around, especially if Texas Brine tear downs vacant homes. Texas Brine officials would not say what their plans are with the property the company is buying.

But many residents are more cautious than Deaton.

Vickie Guilbeau, 64, said she is not sure everything is over with the sinkhole.

“I’ve got a feeling Bayou Corne is going to be off the map one of these days,” said Guilbeau, who has homes in Bayou Corne and Port Allen with her husband, Preston. They are waiting on the class-action settlement and plan to move to Mississippi.

Just 12 hours after the sinkhole appeared, a leaky diesel smell on the property of inset Maury “Mart” Triche ordered a mandatory evacuation for the Bayou Corne and Grand Bayou communities.

“Though the sinkhole was not fully understood at the time, scientists now believe a Texas Brine Co.-operated salt mining operation in what is called the Napoleonville Dome was mined too closely over several years to the outer face of that massive column of salt known as a salt dome,” said the Louisiana Department of Natural Resources.

The cavern breach, which probably happened many months before the sinkhole appeared, allowed surrounding rock to begin to flow into the cavern, which is taller than all but the highest skyscrapers in the world. The resulting underground shifting of rock over the following months unleashed the methane and eventually created the sinkhole.

Reflecting state officials’ early fears that the slurry hole of mud and the partially swallowed cypress trees could quickly expand and take out homes, gas pipelines and liquefied natural gas storage caverns, Triche didn’t nince his words.

“We’re here to let people know the significant risk involved,” said, standing on the bed of a pickup during an impromptu community meeting in a parking lot. He said the risk was not likely, but not impossible.

“We need the word to know what’s going on,” said the state has no plans to fill in the sinkhole because of the instability that could be created in fractured rock underneath the lake.

“Every hour counts,” said Vic, who refers to his husband, Billy, in the present tense and still speaks of “we” and “us.”

Bayou Corne was a special place for them as a young couple and later their family, he said, and they moved there from Donaldsonville in 1999.

Vic said she was thankful for Texas Brine’s consideration and that her new home in Donaldsonville is close to old friends.

“We’ve been blessed,” she said.

Follow David J. Mitchell on Twitter @NWesiveDove.

Jen Wroblewski
August 13, 2014

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