The Watchdogs Of Acadia Parish

Environmental Activists Regularly Get After Hazardous Waste Handlers, With Real Success.

A proposed medical waste incinerator in Crowley didn't get a permit.

The company that wanted to open a hazardous waste transfer station in Mowata is taking the effort to another parish.

A hazardous waste processor in Crowley that wanted a tax exemption gave up. Now it's suing the Acadia Parish Police Jury.

An oil waste processing facility in Iota wants to expand, but 500 people turned out for a town meeting to try to stop it.

The common denominator: Ordinary citizens, people who weren't previously activists but were driven to it by the prospect of hazardous waste in their neighborhoods. They go to meetings and organize their own. Print up flyers. Circulate petitions. Dig in the files of the Department of Environmental Quality. Call DEQ from the car phone when the air sticks.

"They've become quite good at it," says Charley Husthwaite, a Lafayette attorney who acts as special counsel to the Acadia Parish Police Jury for environmental matters, of which there are many.

For years, Acadia Parish has had a waste processor, now notably at a plant in Crowley. Now operated by Laflaw Environmental Services, formerly GES. The contentious rating of Acadia Parish by GES is well known.

The concern is the same thing in Church Point, with the same community reaction.

Perhaps burning medical waste was easier to visualize than some unknown connection labeled hazardous. Somewhere, the idea of medical wastes upset the citizens of Crowley in a way other environmental issues had not.

The incinerator would have been three-quarters of a mile from Bill Nevitt's house. Nevitt, a stockbroker in Lafayette and Sierra Club member, was horrified when DEQ published a draft permit. He and his wife, Lee, weren't alone.

HOPE (Help Our Polluted Environment) formed quickly in protest of the project. The primary strategy was information, and putting the facts in front of the public was enough. "We actively put out flyers on the cars. We hit all the churches one Sunday," Nevitt recalls.

Mary Brasseaux's children were grown, and she had gone back to school at UL. It was graduation day that the noise appeared in the newspaper," Nevitt says. She'd been hearing the clack, the clack, the clack. So she made calls to try to find out what was going on and became involved with HOPE. "It was like I just jumped in, both feet in."

The uproar over the medical waste incinerator eventually included the local Chamber of Commerce, the Crowley Post Signal, state Sen. Cecil Picard and U.S. Sen. John Breaux. DEQ had no regulations governing such incinerators.

Ultimately, in June of 1990, the permit was denied.

Nevitt is one of several local citizens who were actively opposing the issuance of a permit.

Some other objections are that the facility doesn't meet buffer zone requirements because it is too close to a main road, the possibility of groundwater and water contamination, and the fact that much of the area is in the 100-year flood plain.

Nevitt says a citizen's petition for a public hearing has been granted.

T he people of Iota have similar concerns about an oil reprocessing facility called Marcon that cleans old tanks and recovers the remaining low-grade oil. Marcon has been through
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bankruptcy court and several changes of
ownership over the last several years.
Warren Foret is the retired owner of a
furniture store in the town and, like
Nevitt in Crowley, he's become a leader
of the opposition. "People kept press- ing
me, I guess they were looking out for me
to do something," he says.
Foret says he had just been appointed
to the Police Jury's recycling committee
when Mary Brandon pulled him aside
and asked if he knew that Marco had
applied for a hazardous waste permit.
There are four schools plus Southsway
State School within two miles of the
Marco facility. The town's water is drawn
from wells nearby, and there is a crawfish
pond next to the facility, Foret says.
Just last month, Foret and town offi-
cials met with DEQ officials in Baton
Rouge, and they have already contacted
Gov.-elect Edwin Edwards about the
matter. Last fall, Foret and Iota residents
decided to have a town meeting with
DEQ officials. He says the group initially
had some trouble getting information
from DEQ and eventually had to contact
the governor's office to ensure that DEQ
officials would attend.
Iota has a population of 1,300. "We
had 500 people come in here and the
auditorium only seated 450 people," says
Foret. "We had standing room only."
The Marco fight is continuing, he says.
"A lot of people here are very upset. I
think the whole town is 99 percent against
it."
Also ongoing is Chem-Rail's attempt
to locate a transport facility in Aradania.
The original plan was to bring in haz-
ardous waste by railroad to Mowata, a
small community several miles north of
Crowley, and transfer it to trucks for fur-
ther transport. Processed hazardous waste
would be shipped out the same way.
Lee Nevitt's cousin was visiting the
couple and they started talking about
Chem-Rail. "It was next to a rice dryer
with open flames," says Bill Nevitt. The
result of the conversation was instruction
in how to get a fuse short together and
begin organizing opposition. Nevitt says
people in Mowata worked eight hours a
day for a week before a town meeting on
the issue.
According to Hutchens, Chem-Rail
had made some "big mistakes" in its per-
mit application. Opposition also came
from Iota city officials who were con-
cerned about fire protection and having
such a facility near their city. In October,
Ladisef notified the Police Jury that it did
not support Chem-Rail's application
either and had asked that company to
abandon its plans for Mowata.
Chem-Rail is now proposing to put the
transfer station in Opelousas' Industrial
Park. Nevitt had become involved in that
too, and again, opposition is mounting.
Nevitt says Louisiana has more citi-
izens' environmental groups than does
the state of Texas, and more for its popula-
tion than any other state. He says state
and national organizations have been
extremely helpful in providing informa-
tion and suggesting strategies.
Charles Labbe was a police jurors until
last week, having decided not to run for
re-election, and he was one of the spon-
sors of the hazardous waste siting ordi-
nance. In Aradania, he says, the resi-
dents are responsible for calling the
Police Jury's attention to environmental
issues and sticking with it. "As a few of
them start to become a little more literate
about the issues, then they start to
become more effective," Labbe says. "It's
absolutely apparent that they have made
the difference."