

Ascension Parish economic leaders ear-marking west bank area for heavy industrial development

The Advocate – GONZALES – Ascension economic development officials have wrapped up months of largely closed-door planning efforts to turn a swath of agricultural fields on the parish's west bank into a 17,000-acre heavy industry park.

Under the long-range plan, the rural pocket of cane fields along the Mississippi River north of La. 1 and Donaldsonville would be transformed in the next 25 to 30 years into complex of industries with shared roads, rail and port access, officials said.

"In terms of scale, it's probably ... you could think of Geismar when it started," Taylor Gravois, a consulting engineer on the project, said last week at the parish Zoning Commission at the Courthouse Annex in Gonzales.

Geismar is Ascension's industrial heartland, which rose from riverside agricultural land on the parish's east bank starting in the late 1950s.

The area is now home to Shell, BASF, Occidental Chemical, Westlake and others, as well as thousands of jobs. But parish officials have also been warning for some time that the east bank is running out of large industrial sites along the river.

J. Michael Eades, president and chief executive officer of the Ascension Economic Development Corp. , said the idea for the new industrial area arose about two years ago when his group started scouting for new sites.

He said that the chosen area was obvious. The zone, which is between the communities of Modeste and Smoke Bend, has 4.5

miles of frontage along La. 1, access to the Union Pacific Railroad Co. line and 10 miles of river frontage. Eades has said previously the area is one of Louisiana's largest remaining sections of undeveloped property with navigable deepwater access on the river.

[Hints](#) of what AEDC and the state Department of Economic Development were up to emerged last fall when one landowner group rezoned a small part of the area primarily to heavy industry zoning following an AEDC meeting with big landowners a few months earlier at Cafe LaFourche in Donaldsonville.

But Wednesday night's hearing brought the clearest picture yet of the plan and the months of meetings economic development leaders have had with landowners, politicians, state officials and other groups.

Eades presented the Zoning Commission with maps and a planning overlay for the proposed industrial area. The overlay essentially is a set of basic development ground rules for the area. The proposal lays out proposed zoning for different levels of industrial work, sets aside land for the service sector and creates buffers for existing residences.

The overlay earmarks about 11,283 acres for the heaviest industrial zoning, plans show.

AEDC, the Baton Rouge Area Chamber and the state Department of Economic Development also have recently signed an agreement with 16 landowners who own 14,750 acres in the proposed industrial zone to share in the cost of a variety of needed studies on the property, including environmental, road, dock and rail.

Eades said state Economic Development department has the ability to pay for 75 percent of the cost of those studies, but the overlay has to be approved. The new agreement among AEDC, BRAC and the landowners refers to possible grant funding from the state Economic Development.

The commission agreed Wednesday to call a public hearing on the proposal next month and a possible vote on a recommendation to the Parish Council for a final vote.

LED Secretary Steven Grissom said in a statement Thursday that he was encouraged by the progress AEDC, parish government and the landowners have made so far.

"We look forward to continuing our work with local and regional economic development partners as the acreage is further positioned as a viable location for major business prospects," Grissom said.

Eades said while the overlay works through the parish approval process, AEDC will simultaneously do rail and dock feasibility studies, which he said are crucial.

He said, for instance, he does not expect the state Department of Transportation and Development will allow grade crossings on La. 1, but expects overpasses will have to be built to get rail access into the property.

While AEDC seemed to have garnered early support from big landowners, the commissioners questioned whether there could be potential public resistance.

Eades said that he expected there may be some opposition at the commission hearing next month, though he suspected many landowners supported the idea.

Commissioner Donald Songy also asked Eades how close the zone would be to Donaldsonville and residential areas in nearby Smoke Bend.

Eades said the Souvenir Inc. parcel, which is 720 acres near La. 1 and was rezoned in November and December primarily to heavy industry, is about 1,800 feet from Lowery Elementary School. The parcel is on the southern tip of the proposed industrial zone.

Two west bank residents who were listening at Wednesday's lightly attended meeting later said that Eades was not consulting with owners of smaller parcels in the area.

Billy Hayward, 68, who owns 50 acres in Modeste, said that he knew nothing about the plan and neither did his neighbors.

"We've just been left on the outside," said Hayward, who added he was not necessarily against the idea.

Eades disputed the claim. He said Hayward had been to at least one meeting and that the owners of all 276 parcels in the proposed overlay area were invited to a meeting in March.

Eades told the commissioners that he was hopeful the rail, dock and marketing studies and the overlay could be ready as soon as August. Even if those steps are finished, though, plenty more work would be left as the area lacks roads, industrial power and other infrastructure.

Under the agreement with landowners, AEDC has a year to finish the studies, get the overlay approved and identify funding for infrastructure, though the deadline can be extended.

Once approved, the overlay would then have a two-year sunset period. If AEDC can't successfully market the area, the group can recommend the Parish Council to do away with the overlay.

But Eades told Commissioner Matthew Pryor that AEDC is already marketing the property to suitors with an eye for the long term.

"We actually have had a couple of people interested in this," Eades said.

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