

METRO

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Shell reconsidering Norco homes

It may be willing to pay residents more

By Mary Swerczek
River Parishes bureau

Officials with the Shell industrial complex in Norco might consider paying homeowners who live along its fence lines commercial prices for their property, a move that could break a decades-old logjam and entice the homeowners to sell out to the company.

Many residents in Norco's Diamond community, which fronts the west side of the Shell Chemical plant, have asked the company to buy their homes. Shell officials have said they want to, but homeowners say the company isn't willing to give them enough for their property.

But several residents said a recent discussion with Norco Shell Chemical plant manager Jim Kimes has given them new hope.

"This is the most positive response that we've had since we started dealing with Shell," said Percy Hollins, who lives two streets from the complex.

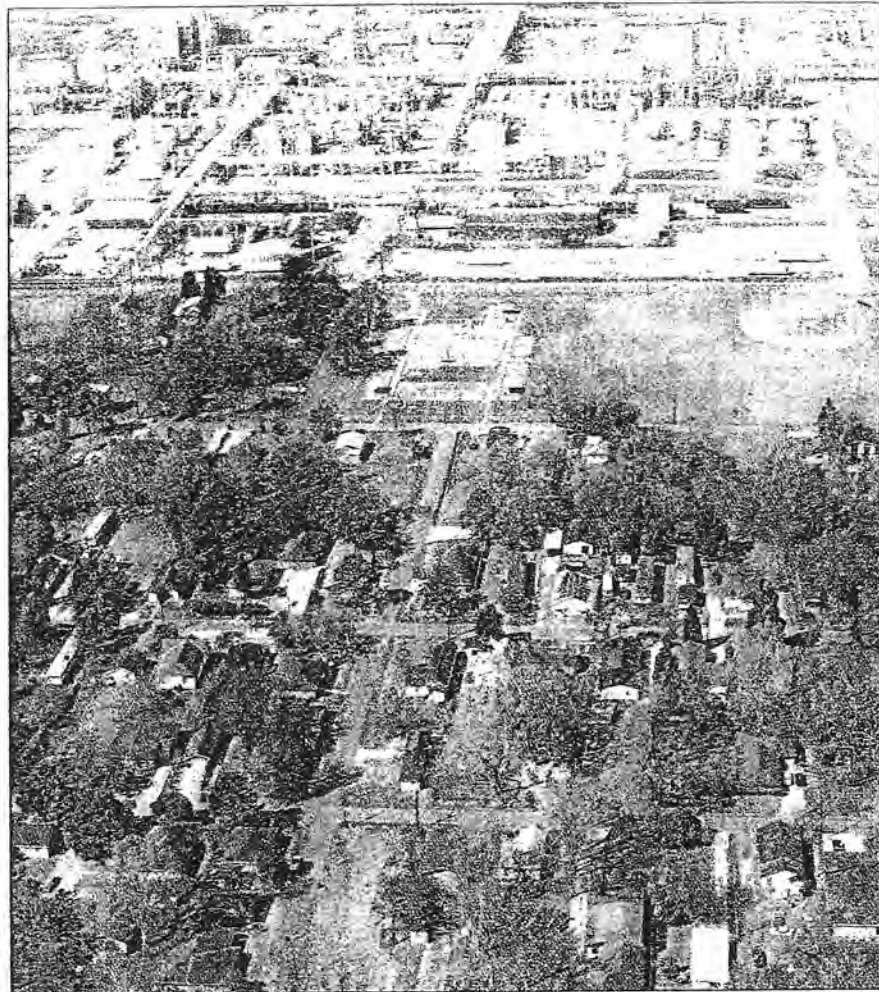
In the past 30 years, Shell has bought surrounding property by paying residential market value for the homes. Diamond residents and their advocates say the policy is unfair because their homes are devalued by being so close to industry.

"Fair market value is not fair. It's a term of art," said Monique Harden, a lawyer with Earth-justice Legal Defense Fund, which has worked with Diamond residents. "A fair market would actually penalize the community."

Fair market value was the topic of a two-hour meeting at Hollins' home this month attended by two Shell officials and a handful of Diamond residents who are members of the group Concerned Citizens of Norco.

At that meeting Kimes told group members that he's hoping to pursue the homes on the fence line more aggressively to try to create a buffer around the plant.

"I hope we do that in a reasonable period of time," he said



STAFF PHOTO BY THOM SCOTT

Houses in the Diamond community of Norco sit near the fence line of the Shell Chemical plant. Many residents are hoping the company will buy up their homes. Real estate experts are examining whether to value the neighboring properties, currently zoned residential, as commercial property, a designation that would raise homeowners' property values.

this week. "We've been at it 30 years and don't want to be at it another 30 years.

"We are exploring all opportunities to try and get a greenbelt. At fair residential value, it's obviously not getting done," Kimes said, adding that real estate experts are examining whether to value the property, currently zoned residential, as commercial property.

The commercial designation would likely let Shell offer the residents more money for



STAFF MAP

See NORCO, B-2

Diamond residents meet with Shell reps

NORCO, from B-1

their homes.

The relationship between industry and the Norco community of Diamond has been rocky in recent years. Some of its 500 residents unsuccessfully sued Shell several years ago to force the plant to buy their homes and relocate them.

Plant officials say any buyout will strive to be fair to the entire 3,500-resident Norco community. Norco is bounded on the east by the Motiva oil refinery, which is partly owned by Shell, and on the west by the Shell Chemical plant.

Shell's policy would be applicable for its fence line on the Motiva and Shell Chemical plants.

"Norco refining has been here for 80 years, and we want to be here for a long time, and for us to be successful, we want to have a supportive community presence," said Allen Kirkley, president and CEO of Norco Refining, a division of Motiva Enterprises LLC, a joint venture of Shell Oil Co., Texaco Inc. and Arabian American Oil Co. "We continue to try to find ways to strengthen our relationship with the entire community of Norco."

He said surveys show that, overall, the Norco community has an overwhelmingly favorable impression of the Shell complex.

Shell officials promised to return to Norco residents after 30 to 60 days with the real estate rates.

Diamond resident Juanita Jones said she hopes to receive a favorable response.

Kirkley "told me about being a good neighbor, but I told him that all I want to do is move out," she said.

