

# Report: Shell should reach out to Norco



STAFF PHOTOS BY THOM SCOTT

Anne Rolfes, second from right, gives a report on the Motiva Enterprises refinery as, from left, Rosemary Brown, Bazile Williams and Percy Hollins and Hazel Davis, far right, all residents of the Diamond community in Norco, listen. Many nearby Norco residents want to be moved farther away from the plant and its emissions.

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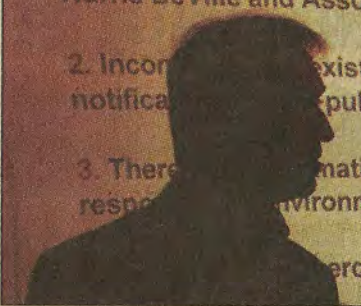
# View of plants differs by race, it says

By **Mary Swerczek**  
and **John M. Biers**  
Staff writers

**Findings**

1. There is a significant disparity in opinions about the effectiveness of communications among the Black populations, White populations, and the plants. This was revealed in the surveys by Harris DeVille and Associates.
2. Incongruities exist in parish/industry-sponsored emergency notification and the public's knowledge of response procedures.
3. There is an information void that exists related to "quick response" environmental and emergency issues.

...perceived benefit from Motiva/Shell, the less



Kirk Menard of Motiva Enterprises explains his company's efforts to improve relations with the Diamond community. Motiva officials pledged a number of steps, including greater efforts to hire from the community and involving Norco youths in youth development programs.

The Shell industrial complex on Thursday pledged to take steps to improve relations with some estranged Norco residents. But even as a government-overseen panel released a yearlong study into how the refinery interacts with the community around it, a group of African-American residents revived a call for the company to relocate their homes.

In eastern St. Charles Parish, Norco is a community of 3,500 people, sandwiched between Shell Chemical Co. and the Motiva Enterprises refinery, which was formerly owned by Shell Oil Co. The companies are collectively known as the Shell industrial complex.

The yearlong study by a panel of industry and community leaders, under the direction of the Environmental Protection Agency, focused on improving communication between the plants and the Norco residents, particularly those in Diamond, a four-block

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# Some Norco residents still demand relocation



STAFF PHOTO BY THOM SCOTT

The homes on Washington Street look directly onto the property of the Shell Chemical plant. Some residents of the Diamond community have asked Shell to relocate them. 'The best thing for us to do is to get out,' Norco resident Percy Hollins said. 'If we get out, then we'll all live longer.'

## **SHELL**, *from A-1*

community on Shell Chemical's fence line. About 500 people, mostly African-Americans, live there.

The report, released Thursday during a meeting of environmentalists and industry and EPA officials in New Orleans, was written by two Motiva officials and a Loyola University representative with input from environmentalists and community activists. It points to a "significant disparity in opinions about the effectiveness of communications among the black populations, white populations and the plants." The community of Norco is about 80 percent white.

### **Familiarity breeds approval**

The committee also found that Norco residents' approval of the plants directly correlates to how familiar they are with their operations.

If "you don't work in our facility and you live nearby, the risk is perceived to be greater," said Kirk Menard, Norco Motiva's safety, health and environment manager, who presented the findings to the National Advisory Council for Environmental Policy and Technology, a government-overseen panel of industry, environmentalists, community activists and government officials.

The diverging viewpoints tend to follow racial lines because few members of the Diamond community work for Shell, several speakers and panelists said.

"And if an African-American became employed by the company, they moved outside of Norco," said Robert A. Thomas, one of the study's authors and a facilitator from Loyola University.

### **Firms pledge to communicate**

Motiva officials pledged several steps to boost relations, including greater efforts to hire from the community and involving Norco youths in youth development programs.

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Don Baker, Shell Chemical's external affairs manager, said that as a result of the study, the company is stepping up its communication efforts and focusing more on improving socioeconomic factors in the Diamond area. Shell is conducting a survey to determine the effectiveness of the company's outreach efforts. The survey will be completed by October 2000, Baker said.

But, in an illustration of the

long-standing tensions between the industry and the Diamond community, several Norco residents revived their demands to have the company relocate them from Norco. The citizen frustration appeared to garner new momentum after a recent environmental report that ranked the Motiva refinery among the nation's worst in toxic emissions. Shell officials have disputed the methodology of the report, written by the Environmental Defense Fund, a New York environmental group.

### Report pushes relocation

As Motiva officials delivered their report, a consortium of environmental groups released a new report it said documented the community's case for relocation. Among the allegations in the report titled "Shell Norco: Toxic Neighbor" were that Norco children have abnormally high rates of asthma and bronchitis, and that air samples taken by activists have found chemicals samples above state standards.

## FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

What the accidental release information communications project determined:

### AMONG THE FINDINGS

- ▶ There is a significant disparity in opinions about the effectiveness of communication among the black populations, white populations and the plants.
- ▶ The greater the perceived benefit from Motiva/Shell, the less the perceived risk.
- ▶ Communications from the plants are perceived to be inconsistent, and among black people associated only with safety incidents inside the complex.
- ▶ Citizens in the Diamond community have concerns about their long-term health, and some are interested in having their property purchased at a fair price.
- ▶ A safe evacuation route for persons living between the east plant and west plant is a key issue.

### AMONG THE RECOMMENDATIONS

- ▶ Provide periodic tours of the facilities that explain plant operations, policies and procedures.
- ▶ Communications should be improved with all populations that are affected by the results of operations by Motiva/Shell.
- ▶ Be absolutely sure that all citizens can be contacted during a crisis.
- ▶ Work with community organizations such as neighborhood groups, schools, churches and civic associations to develop relationships within the community.
- ▶ Provide employment opportunities for local residents and facilitate skills training for those willing to learn.

Source: "Improving Communications Between a Company and its Neighbors: A logical process and model," the report put out by the committee.

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past, the company has paid between \$20,000 and \$80,000 for homes. Kirkley said the company would not alter that policy because merchants and other businesses in Norco would be harmed by a full-scale pullout.

Motiva, Kirkley said, must respond to the "overall community" in Norco, 70 percent of which supports the refinery. As proof of Norco's relative environmental safety, Kirkley noted a new subdivision is being built near the refinery.

Kirkley said Motiva's policy on relocation does not contradict the company's aim of improving communication with the community.

"In my opinion, the reconciliation process has begun," Kirkley said. "We are committed to spending a great deal of time and energy here."

### Diamond residents unsatisfied

But Barbara Evans, who lives in Diamond, said Motiva's overtures to buy her home have low-balled the price. Evans praised Shell and Motiva for making some progress in outreach but said the efforts still only reach "a select few."

She said the Diamond community's proximity to the complex means it gets the worst of the emissions and that the fumes "dissipate" by the time they reach the wealthier, whiter sections of Norco.

Margie Richard, a Diamond resident and member of the panel that created the EPA report, said the industry is moving in the right direction, but she came out strongly for relocation.

"It is progress," Richard said, but added that Shell should help homeowners relocate now more than ever because "we're trapped and industry isn't going away."

Federal officials praised the effort to bring industry and the community together but were taking the long view.

"It's going to take a long time," said Craig Weeks, an EPA official who oversaw the report. "I don't think relations that are based on years of mistrust are going to change overnight."



STAFF PHOTO BY THOM SCOTT

Empty slabs remain where houses once stood in the shadow of the Shell Chemical plant. The plant has been buying homes and razing them.

"The best thing for us to do is to get out," Norco resident Percy Hollins said. "If we get out, then we'll all live longer."

Two years ago, about 250 members of the Diamond community sued Shell, asking to be relocated, but the residents lost after two weeks of testimony. Denny Larson of the Communities for a Better Environment, a California environ-

mental group, said the group doesn't plan to appeal the lawsuit.

"This is to put pressure on Shell to relocate people in a fair and just manner and to put pressure on EPA to encourage Shell to do the right thing," Larson said.

Motiva's policy is to pay fair market value for any property on the fence line, Motiva plant Manager Alan Kirkley said. In the

# Shell should reach out to

*But some residents still seek relocation*

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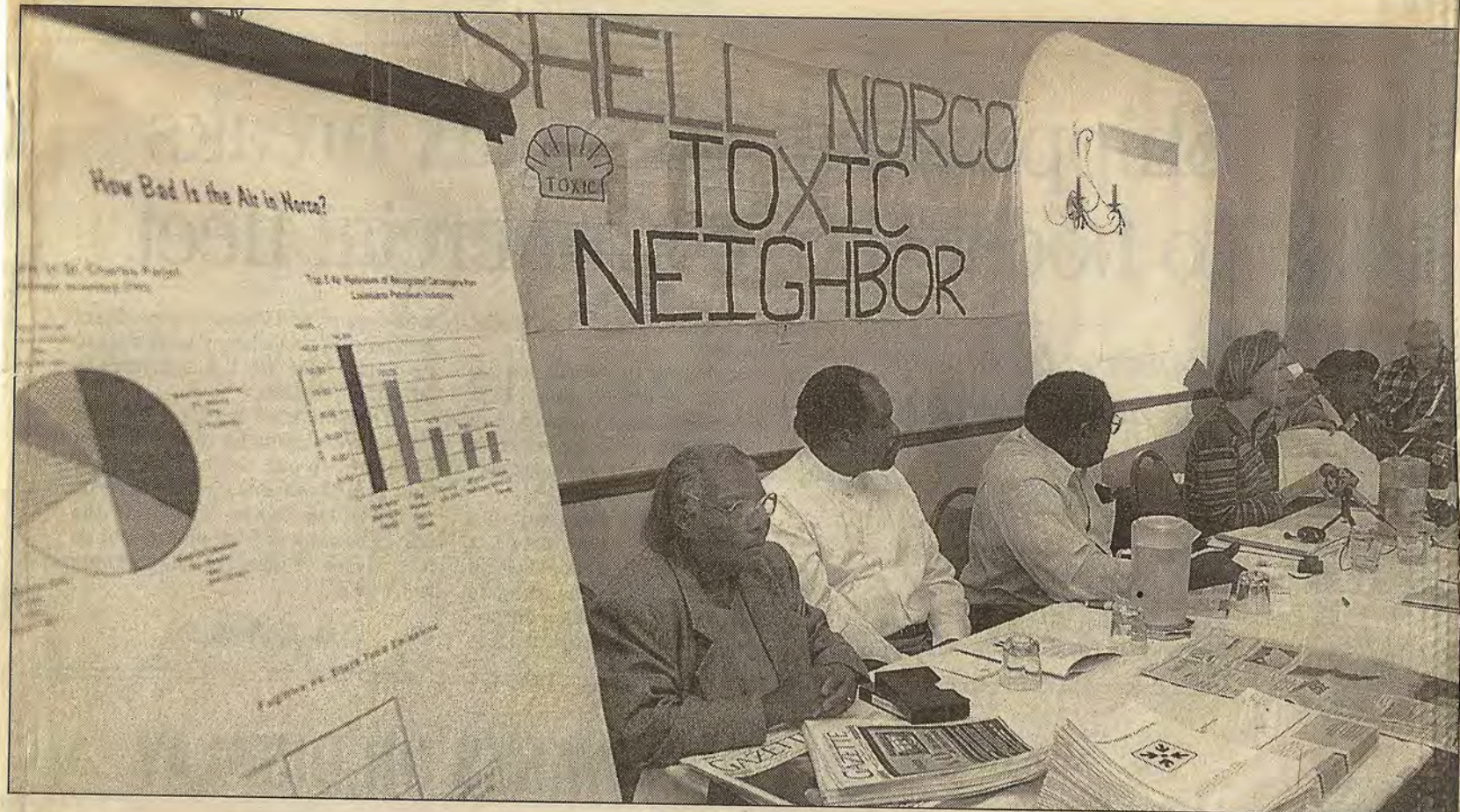
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