

In Louisiana, Residents are Fighting for Every Breath.

When Sharon Lavigne began RISE St. James, a community environmental initiative in St. James Parish, Louisiana, she hoped to make a difference for her neighbors, now it has global implications. In an area where there is the highest rate of air pollution-caused cancer in the United States, nearly 50 times the national average, and air quality and pollution are among the worst in the country, Sharon Lavigne and her small group of motivated volunteers are working tirelessly to change this landscape and prevent further development.

Louisiana established itself as a friendly home for the petrochemical industry and earned the corridor between Baton Rouge and New Orleans the nickname Cancer Alley. Cancer Alley refers to an 85-mile stretch along the Mississippi River filled with **more than 150 petrochemical plants** and refineries. These plants dump more than **13,628,086 tons** of toxic gas emissions yearly, creating an environmental crisis that has been growing since the 1980s. It doesn't end there, plans are underway to construct or further develop 111 more facilities in Louisiana over the next 8 years. Most notably, Formosa Plastics is planning the construction of a **\$9 billion, 14 plant facility covering 2,300 acres** proposed for St. James Parish's 5th District. If constructed, this facility would become the largest new source of greenhouse gases in the nation; its huge volume of GHG – 13 million tons per year – would devastate global progress on climate change.

RISE St. James, together with their main collaborator, Louisiana Bucket Brigade, has delayed the construction of the Formosa Plastics project dubbed the “Sunshine Project” by filing a lawsuit claiming that the original study was inadequate and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has acknowledged the errors. In November 2021, the Corps agreed to take a new, more stringent look at the plans and impact for the new facility. Now the Corps is conducting a more thorough review called an “environmental impact statement.” It's only the fourth such review the New Orleans district of the Corps has conducted since 2008. The new study is likely to delay the project for more than 2 years while a more realistic assessment of the environmental impact of such a large project can be determined.

Lavigne said she got involved after seeing St. James Parish officials approve plans from giant chemical manufacturers to build facilities in Black communities originally zoned residential without discretion. Unfortunately, rezoning has made it possible to largely ignore the concerns of residents. “If my community had a say, we would not allow this company to bulldoze wetlands and sugar cane fields,” says Lavigne. “My family has been here for generations, and the government is favoring foreign polluters over families like mine.” Residents say they're getting sick, and no new plants should be built.

But some local government and business leaders are trying to rally support for a project that could create about 1,200 permanent jobs and pour millions of dollars into the local economy. St. James Parish officials say that the Fourth and Fifth Districts have little new residential construction and dwindling populations. “The land use attorney hired to consult for the parish told me the justification for this zoning change was that there were not any residential permits being issued in this area, so they read that as a stagnant population or population in decline,” said Justin Cray, a New Orleans-based urban planner. “It's true that the population hasn't grown as much, but it's kind of a ‘chicken or the egg’ scenario. Are you actively disinvesting from this area to make it untenable to live there, and destroying property values, or will you support and service people who are already burdened and in desperate need of facilities” Cray asked.

Initially, the parish used a residential designation for both the Fourth and Fifth districts, but that changed when planning committee officials introduced new regulations in 2014. The Fourth

and Fifth districts became “Residential/Future Industrial” in the new land-use plan. Under the new rules, residents cannot subdivide their property for sale, and buffer zones intended to keep pollution-causing plants distanced from schools and churches were not included on maps used to approve the new plants. “These changes happened during the tenure of two men charged with malfeasance, and they remain in-office and crucial backers of the industry,” Anne Rolfes, executive director of the Bucket Brigade, said.

Lavigne has won more support from outside Louisiana than from within and has said that not a single elected official from her home state had helped RISE St. James fight Formosa. In fact, Attorneys General from New York State, Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Jersey, and the District of Columbia general have been more proactive in the fight against Formosa. They contacted the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers demanding a deeper analysis of the climate, wildlife, and environmental justice impacts of the proposed petrochemical complex in St. James Parish while Louisiana officials remain silent.

What now?

RISE St. James is continuing to shift the narrative within St. James Parish and the state that Louisiana is no longer a hospitable location for petrochemical facilities to produce plastic and pollute in the name of profit. But there is more work to do, as national awareness about environmental concerns grows and there is increased understanding of the type of systemic racism embedded in housing policies across the nation, activists are saying that now is the time to demand more proactive solutions and create new restrictions, starting here in the most impacted district in the country.