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Residents can return, but pollution remains



STAFF PHOTOS BY DAVID GRUNFELD

A boom helps stop oil and residue from a Friday explosion at Smitty's Supply from floating down the Tangipahoa River on Monday.

Amid cleanup after Tangipahoa Parish plant explosion, authorities say danger has passed

BY DAVID J. MITCHELL, WILLIE SWETT and MARCO CARTOLANO
Staff writers

Three days after a lubricants plant in Roseland blew up and turned into a raging fire, forcing nearly 1,000 people to flee, local officials eased a 1-mile evacuation zone as firefighters brought the blaze nearly completely under control.

Crews also worked Monday to keep oily residue from Smitty's Supply Inc. from flowing down the Tangipahoa River and into Lake Pontchartrain, with around 5,900 feet of boom deployed in total. Soot still covered areas of the town and the air smelled of oil and grease.

Gov. Jeff Landry traveled to nearby Amite to meet with local officials in the aftermath of the fire, which covered around 20 acres. There have been no injuries or deaths from the incident, and the State Fire Marshal along with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives will investigate the cause, which remained unclear.



Matthew Allen, executive director of Northshore Riverwatch, collects oil from the Tangipahoa River in Independence on Monday.

"From what I have been told, from what I can see, there really is no imminent danger to any life or property, other than we have to clean up a big mess," Landry said at a news conference on Monday afternoon in Amite.

Asked about health concerns from people who swim and fish in the Tangipahoa River, Landry said, "What we've seen so far does not indicate there is any danger or immediate danger to wildlife or human health."

While oily substances and soot still covered much of the surrounding area, life slowly began returning to normal in the small rural town in Tangipahoa Parish. Some residents who evacuated started returning home and the Roseland Montessori School planned to reopen Tuesday.

The evacuation, initially extending to a mile radius, was reduced to a more compact area closest to the plant on Monday, though sections of major highways through the town remained closed, including U.S. 51.

The blaze was 98% contained on Monday, but myriad environmental concerns persisted. The contents of the soot were being tested by environmental regulators, but results were not yet available.

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Landry's port plan has early success

Panel works deal for supplying Hyundai Steel plant

BY ANTHONY McAULEY
Staff writer

The \$5.8 billion Hyundai Steel plant that's set to rise in Ascension Parish is a key project for Gov. Jeff Landry's administration. And to make it work, Hyundai and state officials have long known they would need a new port facility to bring raw materials in and send finished goods out to the Korean automaker's assembly plants.

The answer to that logistics problem came last month, when the Port of South Louisiana was tapped to build and operate a new \$25.5 million deepwater dock. The project, however, is on land controlled by the Port of Baton Rouge, which in years past may have raised thorny questions of control and oversight that could've turned into a political brawl.

But under the newly established Louisiana Ports and Waterways Investment Commission, which has been tasked with directing public funds to important economic development projects, the ports hashed out an agreement.

"What made the deal between Port of South Louisiana and Baton Rouge that much easier to accomplish is that the ports have been meeting regularly since late 2023," said Joe Toomy, the shipping industry executive and former chair of the Port of New Orleans who has been overseeing the Waterways Commission's efforts.

If the Hyundai dock project is

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Louisiana Ports and Waterways Investment Commission

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Energy, natural resources chief stepping down

BY MEGHAN FRIEDMANN
Staff writer

Tyler Gray, the secretary of the Louisiana Department of Energy and Natural Resources, is stepping down on Sept. 2, state officials announced Monday.

Deputy Secretary Dustin Davidson will take over as secretary. Stephen Swiber, the state's chief resilience officer, will move from the Governor's Office to fill the deputy secretary position, the agency said in a memo to employees.

"Dustin has been invaluable in his service as

➤ See **ENERGY**, page 5A



STAFF FILE PHOTO BY HILARY SCHEINUK

The East Baton Rouge Parish school system is offering incentives to combat a shortage of available bus drivers.

Extra-route pay raise for school bus drivers OK'd

EBR has four dozen vacant positions

BY CHARLES LUSSIER
Staff writer

A shortage of bus drivers is once again holding back East Baton Rouge Parish in its efforts to improve its much-maligned student transportation system.

Superintendent LaMont Cole on Thursday persuaded the parish School Board to approve new incentives to cover the hole:

- A nearly \$5-per-hour increase in the rate it pays current drivers willing to run extra routes.
- A finder's fee of up to \$500 for school employees who refer someone to be a bus driver, and that per-

son stays a while.

In a letter to the board, Cole said the latest changes are needed because there is "a shortage of available drivers, leaving several routes unassigned."

Rob Howle, director of transportation, said the district is short 49 active drivers.

Faced with a similar shortage this spring, the school system hired private school bus giant First Student to take over six routes. Howle said that he reached out recently to First Student about potentially re-upping the contract and said he was told the company was too tied up with finding sufficient drivers for its current clients locally.

The rate for running extra routes

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