



— SINCE 1837 —

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STAFF PHOTOS BY BRETT DUKE

Tourists and residents walk by the St. Louis Cathedral in New Orleans. The current structure, which dates to 1851, is easily the most famous landmark in one of the world's most famous neighborhoods.

## PRESERVING A LEGACY OF FAITH

With \$45 million in private funding, a long-overdue restoration of St. Louis Cathedral will start this summer. The work will take years.

BY BOB WARREN  
Staff writer

**K**evin Morris knows St. Louis Cathedral like few other people. Carefully ascending its creaky wooden stairs, climbing through tight doorways and navigating narrow catwalks as if by rote, Morris points out termite damage here, water damage there, and numerous signs of decay at points in between.

Morris, president of Holly & Smith Architects and the chief architect of an ambitious and expensive cathedral restoration project that will begin this summer and likely last the rest of this decade, has spent countless hours poring over old drawings and peering into the building's many dark corners.

He knows the place like a doctor might know a longtime patient — and he knows that the grandeur of St. Louis Cathedral that people see from the outside doesn't always match what is revealed on the inside.

"People are blown away by the beauty of it, the historic aspect of it, its significance," he said. "But I don't think that the general public knows how much deterioration is going on."

The cathedral has withstood di-



Kevin Morris, a president of Holly & Smith Architects of New Orleans, walks up the stairs next to the bells in the central spire of the St. Louis Cathedral.

sasters, war, pandemics and even a bomb blast. Churches on the Jackson Square site in New Orleans' French Quarter have been destroyed and rebuilt over a three-century history. The current structure, which dates to 1851, is easily the most famous landmark in one of the world's most famous neighborhoods. And it's show-

ing its age. The Archdiocese of New Orleans is expected to soon announce details of the extensive work that will cost an estimated \$45 million, all paid through donations being raised in a private campaign called "Our City

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► See a video inside the cathedral's restoration. GO TO NOLA.COM  
► See details of the plan and a timeline. PAGE 9A



## Abandoned oil wells in La. hit 6,500

Record reflects 35% increase in two years

BY ALEX LUBBEN  
Staff writer

The number of abandoned oil and gas wells in Louisiana has surged over the past year despite efforts to address the problem, reaching a record high and placing a heavy financial burden on the state to plug them.

The recent increase follows a trend that has been building for years, partly due to industry fluctuations and shifting regulations, officials say. More than 2,100 wells have been officially labeled as "orphaned" since the start of 2025, leaving the state with nearly 6,500 in total, according to the Louisiana Department of Conservation and Energy.

High well-plugging costs, compounded by decades of lax regulatory requirements, have created the dilemma Louisiana now faces. The state recently strengthened rules on well owners and created a new authority to oversee how companies meet their financial obligations, but there are questions over whether those changes will be enough.

Many wells on the orphaned list were drilled decades ago and risk blowing out if they are not plugged. That's what happened to an inactive, though not yet orphaned, 82-year-old well in Plaquemines Parish last year.

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## Jefferson schools see progress under superintendent

Gray hopes to keep district advancing amid challenges

BY ELYSE CARMOSINO  
Staff writer

James Gray was all smiles when he popped into a first grade classroom at the start of the school year to dole out high-fives, crack jokes and query students about what they were learning.



Gray

If the Jefferson Parish schools superintendent seemed more at ease this first day of school than in years past, it's no wonder. In August 2020, just a month after Gray took over the state's largest school district during the throes of the COVID-19 pandemic, Jefferson Parish classrooms reopened while New Orleans' remained closed, upsetting many teachers and leading thousands of families to opt for remote learning.

The following year, Hurricane Ida upended back-to-school season when it blew the roofs off several school buildings and flooded others, damaging a third of the district's campuses and destroying three schools.

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