

# The Plaquemines GAZETTE

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## Mardi Gras Pass, a “Natural Diversion” that Excites Some and Inflames Others

By Justin Walton  
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Traveling about 35 miles south from New Orleans into Plaquemines Parish—past the ongoing construction of the new Belle Chasse Toll Bridge, the recently abandoned Phillips 66 Oil refinery in Alliance, and the numerous port developments in the infancy of their design and construction process—you’ll find the rural area of South Plaquemines. Dotted by small communities on the east and west banks, a specific location at river mile 43.7 on the parish’s east bank in the Bohemia Spillway has become something of a “natural experiment” for those who support restoring southeastern Louisiana’s vanishing marshes with

fresh water diversions.

Dubbed as Mardi Gras Pass back in 2012—on Mardi Gras day, the Mississippi River originally overtopped and cut through the east bank levee, creating a “crevasse” that stretched all the way to the back levee canal—the pass was just a bit of water going over the east bank levee at first. But the power of the Mississippi River’s ceaseless flow would keep widening this levee “overtopping” until Mardi Gras Pass became a full-on rupture in the levee.

Suddenly, without any human intervention, the river was re-connected to the marsh beyond the levee, depositing sediment needed to nourish and restore the delicate ecosystem. The Mississippi River dumping needed

sediment into the marshes of southern Louisiana used to be commonplace. However, after the Great Mississippi River Flood in 1927 decimated the southeastern Louisiana region, the federal government responded by building an expensive network of levees that locked the river in place, hopefully preventing future disasters.

Blocked off from the river and its nourishing sediment, the legacy of intense oil exploration, navigational canal dredging, and hurricanes—all exposing the ecosystem to the salty water in the Gulf of Mexico, which is caustic freshwater marshes—these marshes have been disappearing at an alarming rate. Some numbers estimate land loss at a football field every 100 minutes.

But the creation of Mardi Gras Pass has been an encouraging sign to environmentalist groups such as Restore the Mississippi River Delta (MRD), who have been monitoring its activity. As Mardi Gras Pass widened over the year, nearly 300 feet long at this point, allowing more and more sediment to throw through the levee opening, a significant amount of land has been built in the area.

Just to the north of the diversion, young willow trees sprout out of the banks of the back levee canal, which Coastal and Community Program Director at the Pontchartrain Conservancy and member of MRD’s sci-

DIVERSION — PAGE 2

## Bill Placing Restrictions on Menhaden Industry Defeated in 2022 Session

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Back at the April 28 Plaquemines Parish Government (PPG) council meeting, the council approved a resolution stating their opposition to House Bill 1033, a piece of legislation that would place regulations on the Menhaden fishing industry in Louisiana. Now, nearly two months later, the 2022 legislative session has been adjourned, and it would appear that the opposition against the bill has been temporarily successful.

According to the Louisiana state legislature website, the bill was passed by a 75-22 vote in the house and sent to the senate—where it was sent to the Committee on Natural Resources. While it was “considered” by committee during their May 26 meeting, a motion to defer the bill or essentially kill the bill for the session passed 4-3.

Local PPG officials all explained, during the April 28 meeting, that this bill would be yet another disaster for a parish already beset by economic troubles. Within Plaquemines is the Daybrook Fisheries Empire facility—one of two plants in Louisiana that processes the state’s menhaden catch. At the April 28 meeting, district 7 council member Carlton LaFrance said that with the “industry barely keeping its head above water” as things currently stand, further regulations would certainly “be the end of this facility.”

MENHADEN — PAGE 3

## Rodney and Donna Hight Commit to Funding Couvillion’s Teacher of the Year Endowment Challenge

Couvillion Group’s Teacher of the Year endowment has been met by Rodney and Donna Hight with a donation of \$10,000 and a commitment to permanently fund the Teacher of the Year.

The endowment’s objective is to administer funds and arrange expenditures to financially support three Teacher of the Year awards, one from each of Plaquemines’ public high schools. Administered by the Plaquemines Parish School Board, educators will be selected by adhering to the Louisiana Teacher of the Year requirements.



Pictured, from left: Isabelle Couvillion, Chris Leopold, Bill Bubrig, Rodney Hight, Dr. Stuart Guey and Donna Hight at the Belle Chasse Rotary Club Foundation.

## LAYAYA Brings Environmental Awareness to Plaquemines

Plaquemines Parish residents may notice a few new pieces of art in their favorite recreational areas this summer, courtesy of the students of the Louisiana Young Authors & Young Artists (LAYAYA) organization and funded by Phillips 66 and Chevron Oronite Oak Point.

In early 2021, the local students of the LAYAYA ‘STEAM Meets GREEN’ classes began designing and building art pieces that have been installed in public areas. Students also conducted research for each piece to contain important information about the environment and what

LAYAYA — PAGE 2

MAILING INFO HERE

## Chevron Oronite Volunteers Revitalize the Nursery at Woodlands Preserve

On Wednesday, May 19, 11 volunteers from Chevron Oronite braved the heat to help revitalize the Tree Nursery and replot seedlings at Woodlands Preserve in Belle Chasse. The Nursery houses native trees, seedlings and saplings that are part of ongoing restoration efforts to replace trees destroyed in Hurricanes and replenish areas where invasive Chinese Tallow trees were removed. After the first wave of springtime growth, the nursery was in need of some love and attention.

Chevron Oronite Volunteers cleared weeds and debris from in and around the nursery and laid new landscaping fabric to prevent weeds from overtaking the nursery again. Volunteers also helped to replot native seedling and saplings. Their work created space for seedlings to grow into saplings and made it possible for more saplings to fill the nursery.

These seedling and saplings are essential for building a stronger forest structure that can continue to serve as a wind

NURSERY — PAGE 2

Pictured are the Chevron Oronite volunteers at Woodlands Preserve in Belle Chasse on May 19.



## NURSERY

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buffer and natural sponge for the community as well as providing food and habitat for native wildlife and a beautiful setting for recreation.

With the help of the Volunteers from Chevron Oronite, the nursery is once again ready to house a wide variety of native trees and understory plants. The next time you take a hike at Woodlands Preserve, check out the Nursery at the trailhead to catch a glimpse of the saplings that will one day create the forest canopy at Woodlands Preserve.

Before (left) and after (right) the clean up of the tree nursery.



## LAYAYA

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people can do to protect native species and natural resources.

"In addition to environmental education, through designing and constructing the signs, the students have gained skills in CAD design, woodworking, fiberglass working, sculpture and of course art," said Executive Director Joannie Hughes. "The signs have been appreciated, and I even received a message from Lt. Governor Nungesser thanking us for our efforts to keep Louisiana clean."

The locations of the signs are as follows:

- Myrtle Grove Marina
- Walker Road Boat Launch
- Jesuit Bend Park
- Lake Park Neighborhood (Sherwood Drive near Live Oak)

LAYAYA students are preparing for upcoming installations at Port Sulphur Fishing Pier, Main Street Boat Launch and Medal of Honor Park with more signs scheduled for construction.

"We could not do this level of work without our community partners, and we look forward to working with them as we move into the next exciting chapter of service for LAYAYA in the



Two of the signs located at Myrtle Grove Marina in Plaquemines Parish.

community," said Hughes.

### How a local STEAM lab supported COVID prevention

In 2019, Phillips 66 funded computers with software and Oak Point funded 3D printers for students to operate at LAYAYA's Science Technology Engineering Art and Math (STEAM) lab in Belle Chasse. A few months later, Phillips 66 provided additional funding as these same students began using this technology to print PPE for front-line workers



during the pandemic.

"We're producing masks, filter covers and face shields for our first responders and those on the forefront of this crisis in our community," said Executive Director Joannie Hughes in April of 2020. "We could not do this without support."

LAYAYA is a non-profit with a mission to ensure opportunities for youth from all backgrounds to

do something creative and positive with their talents and time by creating an environment that will inspire personal growth and development by both building community and self-awareness through the arts. Read more about LAYAYA at <http://www.layaya.org/>.

Both Phillips 66 and Chevron Oronite Oak Point operate assets in Plaquemines Parish.

## DIVERSION

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entific team Michael Hopkins says is indicative of a "healthy marsh." Additionally, all about Mardi Gras Pass, wet banks of mud—which Hopkins calls mud-flaps—can be seen peeking just above the surface: the beginning stage of the land building process.

The natural crevasse in the levee currently allows about 35,000 cubic feet of Mississippi River water to flow through it every second. Lacking a regulation system to control that flow, the results of this "natural diversion" are used by MRD and other environmentalists to argue for the Coastal Protection & Restoration Authority's (CPRA) mid-Barataria sediment diversion project, which could allow up to 75,000 cubic feet per second at full flow.

But not everyone shares this starry eyed view of Mardi Gras Pass or diversions in general. Within Plaquemines, there is a loud and passionate movement of locals—ranging from commercial fishermen, oyster fishermen, parish government officials, all the way up to Lt. Governor Billy Nungesser—who are staunchly opposed to this kind of coastal restoration.

Citing impacts to local industries the people depend on for their livelihood, increased flood risk for communities below diversions (which the CPRA itself acknowledges will be a side effect of their Barataria Bay diversion), and the dismally slow pace at which they move—building land over decades rather than immediately—these opponents believe diversions do more harm than good.

"Go over to the east bank and see what Mardi Gras Pass [and other natural diversions] have done to that community. It used to be that the place was teeming with oyster reefs and other [wildlife important to commercial fishing]. Now, there's nothing, and the people over there are impoverished because of it," chairman of the Louisiana Oyster Task force, local Plaquemines oysterman, and one of the most vocal leaders in the opposition to diversions Mitch Jurisich stated. "The communities of Davant, Phoenix, east Pointe a la Hache all depended on that industry. Now, it's completely dormant over there."

"The name Mardi Gras Pass [for that crevasse] is too festive. I like to call it the 'failed bohemia spillway' because it just helped destroy that community over there," he added.

For Jurisich and others like him, diversions represent an existential threat to lower Plaquemines. Though diversions are billed as the savior of a dying coast, the parish most affected by land loss will only be negatively impacted for the foreseeable future.

"We know, for a fact, that these diversions kill our oyster and fishing industry, but if you really look at the science, we don't know if they'll be enough to save the dying coast," Jurisich stated. "We're being asked to sacrifice our way of life on a maybe. On the south end of Plaquemines, we have communities that have been struggling for a long time, but they've been able to survive because of these industries. The diversions will be the thing that forces a lot of people to finally move out."

Jurisich also questions whether diversions are truly the best way to restore the eroding marshes. He believes the state of Louisiana, CPRA, and environmentalists should be building land with sediment dredged out of the Mississippi River—like the Spanish Pass Marsh Creation Project. Though these types of project are technically "more expensive" and require continual maintenance, Jurisich stated that they do a better job of "immediately creating" land that is resilient and protects the parish from hurricanes.

"For the first year of the Barataria Bay diversion, no land is going to be built. They say it's going to take years and years before anything starts to show up. But look at the [Spanish Pass project], that's all from dredging and there is already actual land there," Jurisich stated. "The only reason I think diversions are getting pushed so hard is the money. They've already sunk millions of dollars into the [Barataria Bay diversion] and it's not even permitted."

In his criticism of diversions, Jurisich brings up one salient point that hasn't been brought up in previous discussions on diversions: the Mississippi River in 2022 is "not the same river as it was in the old days."

Supporters of diversions often state that they mimic the river's "natural state" before the levees locked it in place. But Jurisich notes that this is only part of the story. Prior to the levees, the river didn't just spill fresh water into the marshes (as the diversions will do). The river itself literally wandered throughout the region. When enough sediment had been deposited along its path, it would spill out of where it was and settle in a new area.

It was an incredibly complex environmental system. But when the US Army Corps of Engineers took charge of the river through the levees, the system was fundamentally changed. The river could no longer flow freely as it caused disastrous flooding for U.S. residents.

Diversions, then, are an attempt to return to an environmental state that longer exists, which will only cause hardship for those who depend on the current ecosystem in Plaquemines. Instead, Jurisich wants to look at new means to confront the land loss conflict.

"You can't mimic what God created. These diversions won't be able to keep up with the rate of land loss we're experiencing. We need to dredge and create land that way," Jurisich stated. "I want coastal restoration. All oystermen want the coast to be healthy. But the people who are pushing diversions either don't live here, have a financial stake in these plans, or are young. They're not listening to us, the locals, who have been around this river for generations."

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