Livingston cleanup nears end in ’82 train derailment

By Steve Hardy
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Livingston Mayor Derral Jones talks about the 1982 train derailment that happened in the center of town and had chemical tanker cars burning for 14 days. Jones, the fire chief then, said the containment site is finally being shut down after 33 years of cleanup and monitoring.

Livingston – The wreckage splintered the plains like matchsticks and the oil had climbed the trees in fields north of Livingston. But even after the last fire had been mopped out, a more insidious threat had reached into the earth beneath Livingston.

At 5:12 a.m. Sept. 28, 1982, an Illinois Central Gulf freight train staffed by a crew that had been drinking bourbon ran off the tracks just north of the Livingston Town Hall. Of the 43 cars that derailed, 34 contained hazardous materials or flammable petroleum products, and many burned, burned and exploded, spewing toxic vapors over the town.

Residents woke up thinking they had been thrown into a war zone or the path of an earthquake. One told a reporter she thought the world was coming to an end.

“We were so unprepared for something like this … In no way were we prepared to deal with this,” recalled Mayor Derral Jones, who was the fire chief at the time.

“We had one raggedy-ass old truck and about a dozen people in the back of a truck,” Jones said.

Jones, the fire chief then, said the containment site is finally being shut down after 33 years of cleanup and monitoring.

The Advocate staff photo by PATRICK DIONIS

Probes to examine Angola warden’s business practices

By Mary Laux
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Louisiana’s legislative auditors and the Department of Public Safety and Corrections each have opened reviews into the private real estate dealings of Brut Cain, the long-tenured warden of the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola who did business with family and friends of inmates in apparent violation of rules.

But the Corrections Department review won’t be overseen by Secretary Jimmy LeBlanc, who recused himself from the matter.

The separate probes come as Gov.-elect John Bel Edwards is considering who to appoint to his Cabinet, including corrections secretary. Edwards takes office Jan. 11, typically, most appointments are announced before inauguration day. Last month, The Advocate reported Cain, 73, sold interests in large tracts of West Feliciana Parish several years ago to two prominent real estate developers — both friends or family of two murderers who received favorable treatment at Angola — in separate deals.

Cain invested more than $2 million in the properties just before the national recession began in 2008, but now it’s valued at nearly $12 million. The Advocate reported that in 2014, he put his interest in about 150 acres in the parish for $1 million, and a Louisiana state employee who worked for his company later used $1.5 million of that interest to pay a mortgage.

Cain’s real estate dealings with inmates’ families, friends questioned

Gov.-elect John Bel Edwards spends much of his time these days in meetings with legislators, business leaders and other state officials on issues such as higher education and health care.

He’s in “transition” mode — the official term for the period between his Nov. 24 election and Jan. 11, when he takes the oath of office.

“We’re working tremendously hard to get it right,” Edwards said during an interview at his transition headquarters. “It’s a daunting challenge, but we are up to it.”

Edwards’ transition team is working out of eight quarters on the 12th floor of LSU’s Howe-Smith Hall, which houses Edwards’ offices on the east side of the building.

FROM TOP: A home is destroyed in Livingston after the 1982 Illinois Central Gulf derailment. A Worker prepares to remove a damaged tank car. Debris is scattered.

Advocate staff photo by JASON DAVIS

Seeking student aid soon to be required

By Will Sentell
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Concerned that tens of millions of dollars are being left on the table, Louisiana leaders are launching a bid to ensure that public school seniors apply for federal or state education aid for college.

The state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education last week approved a new policy that, starting in 2018, will require Louisiana’s roughly 35,000 seniors each year to apply for the money or submit a signed form that says they will not.

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Business: 1E; Commentary: 7B; Education: 1G; Entertainment: 1D; Outdoors: 14C; Television: 11D; Weather: 8B
In 1983, a year after the Illinois Central train derailment in Livingston, a three-section pit, known as the Livingston Industrial Commission, was created to monitor and clean up the contamination site, digging at about eight acres near the crash site. It straddles U.S. 190 in an area north of the Circle Road Park and east of Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) environmental scientist Tommy Doran, who has been assigned to the derailment cleanup for the past four years. His department regularly tests the contamination site, and for four straight quarters, the concentration of perchloroethylene has dropped to safe levels. Droy said his firm is preparing the site closure report and plans to submit it this month. A final DEQ review will take a few weeks, but if everything is in order, the site will be released from monitoring early next year, Doran said.

Plans for the site are still being considered. The Interstate Commission will be dissolved once the matter is put to rest and plans to donate the land to the town. Jones is thinking about toying or donating at least some of the property to the school system, which has offices on an adjacent plot.

Droy was going to mix it with vegetable oil and inject it into the ground. It was an “innovative” solution, said Droy, environmental scientist who said the land to the town. Jones is thinking about toying or donating at least some of the property to the school system, which has offices on an adjacent plot.

The town’s engineering firm reached out to Droy’s company, Toxicological & Environmental Assessment Inc., and he began formulating a plan to use a relatively new substance created by NASA known as Emulsified Zirconium Iron Oxide, or EZVI. It was first field-tested at the Cape Canaveral Air Force Station in 2002, and wasn’t made commercially available until 2005, so in the world of large-scale cleanup of carcinogenic industrial cleaning agents, it was still pretty new on the scene. Droy was going to mix it with vegetable oil and inject it into the ground.

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The town, it paused. First came the disaster, actually people around Livingston were quick to point to the school system, which has offices on an adjacent plot.

To make matters worse, John Watson expressed interest in building a new facility to host professional development, since the parish doesn’t have a site dedicated to training staff, but he emphasized that nothing has been finalized.

Landmark case

The 21st Judicial District also will have to distribute the last of the outstanding settle-... No one could deal with that disaster, 33 years later.

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Judge Bruce Bennetta dded incidents of cancer, Jones said.

Between the toxic spill and in-20 years, never foundal ink as health issues. However, doc-

Another million dollars was set aside for any future claims related to the derailment, such as health issues. However, doc-

that none of the money has been paid out.

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Lithium Mayor Demar Jones, left, talks with site manager Tommy Arledge, right, about the 1982 train derailment that happened in the center of town and had chemical tanker cars burning for 14 days. The building in the background is the monitoring station for the containment site.

“This was a case of bad judge-

ment, whiskey and women,” said attorney John Sinque-

field, who was called in from the East Baton Rouge District Attorney’s Office to prosecute the case because the local DA and the state Attorney General were involved in related civil suits.

The Canadian National Rail-

way purchased and took over Illinois Central Gulf in the 1990s.

Rallying point

Through the derailment site is plugging the wells and slant-

ing the monitoring station, the community will have a lasting impression on just the town, but all of Louisiana.

“I believe it to be the catalyst to where we are today in chemi-
cal response,” said State Police Superintendent Mike Edmon-

son, whose agency is in charge of all hazmat emergencies.

Edmonson had been a trooper for all of 21 months when the spill occurred and was placed in front of experts to give up-
dates on the response.

“We had all the media in the world out there,” he recalled.

Many first responders real-

ized they couldn’t decipher the chemical warning symbols on the tanker cars, so they didn’t know which face to spray with water, what to spray with foam and what to let burn out.

After the derailment, State Police put protocols in place to teach crews how to determine the safest way to dispose of chemicals, how to determine when to evacuate an area and how to improve communica-
tions with the public and be-
tween agencies, Edmonson said.

“They really didn’t have ... All (the procedures) came out of that Livingston train derail-

ment,” he said. “A lot of tech-

nical knowledge came out of the whole response.”

Edmonson, a toxicologist, said it was a “clear rallying point” for state environmental regulators to receive more specialized training. Devon, the environ-

mental scientist, said it “had a huge impact” on federal ef-

forts to raise standards for hazmat professionals.

Once the decontamination site is officially closed, Jones hopes to build a ceremony for all the first responders, scien-
tists, officials and residents to get together, and remember the derailment as they put it behind them.

“It’s probably the biggest sto-
r in ever come out of the town of Livingston,” the mayor said.

Workers in Livingston in 1982 wash toxic chemicals off their protective suits before they leave the crash site of the Illi-
nois Central train derailment.

In this article:

1982

20 years

14 days

1,900 plaintiffs

$3.5 million

$450,000

The fund was invested and is currently under construction. Bennett plans to order the parish to put the money to a use.

Bennett is retiring Jan. 1 af-

ter 28 years on the bench, so he hopes to hold a ceremony for the 1,900 plaintiffs to receive more specialized training.

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