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Neighborhood near Pinova has mixed feelings about closure

By MICHAEL HALL mhall@thebrunswicknews.com

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A few months after an April fire caused significant damage, Pinova announced last month it was shutting down its Brunswick plant. Michael Hall/The Brunswick News

Etta Brown has lived in the shadow of the Pinova plant her entire life. The industrial operation over the years provided for her family, shaped the skyline of her memories and until recently was a constant fixture in the city she loves.

Those memories, however, are joined with the knowledge of an environmental legacy in her neighborhood that she said can be scary if she thinks too much about it.

Brown, 73, is like many of her neighbors in the Urbana Park and Perry Park neighborhoods that surround the plant. She has mixed feelings about the plant's closure following a massive April 15 fire that gutted operational portions of the facility.



The plant has operated at the site for 112 years. When it was built, it was outside of town. Neighborhoods like Urbana and Perry Park grew up around it.

“It’s been a big part of the community,” Brown said. “I’ve always known Hercules. I’ve lived within five or six blocks of it all my life.”

She will not miss the smell of the plant as it turned pine stumps into various rosin products for use in products like sports drinks, chewing gum, tape and other things. She will also not miss thinking about the chances of an industrial catastrophe, especially after seeing the raging flames and heavy black smoke rising from the plant a few months ago.

But Brown is also acutely aware of the economic impact the closing will have on her neighborhood and her city.

As a child the plant was owned by Hercules and just about everyone Brown knew either worked there or had relatives who did.

Her uncle worked there for 42 years. Her husband worked there for a while as well.

Today, her son is one of the more than 200 soon-to-be former employees looking for a new job as Pinova shuts down the plant at 2801 Cook St. Brown said he attended a job fair this week hosted by the Brunswick Golden Isles Chamber of Commerce and the Golden Isles Economic Development Authority intended to help people laid off by the closing continue to provide for their families.

“If you got a job at Hercules (now Pinova), you were in the money,” Brown said. “You would work there until you retired. Economically, this will affect Brunswick a lot.”

On the other side of the equation, the plant’s closing will put a lot of folks in her neighborhood at ease after the April 15 blaze.

“It was frightening,” Brown said.

She went to witness the fire and saw just how close she and her neighbors were to something dangerous.

“I was on L Street and I could stand and look at the fire,” Brown said. “It was like stuff was boiling. I realized that I had seen a miracle. Hercules was on fire and we’re still here to talk about it.”

That reminded her of a lifetime of neighborhood impacts for which she believes the facility is responsible. Brown knows people who have had health problems they attribute to living close to the plant. She doesn’t drink the water from her faucet for fear of contamination from the facility.

And then there was the odor that seemed to permeate the neighborhood on certain days.



“Growing up there was always that smell,” Brown said. “There was always something floating around in the air too. You could see it sometimes.”

Hercules, which still owns non-operational portions of the facility, is a co-permittee with Pinova, which owns the operational portions of the site, on environmental cleanup efforts overseen by the federal Environmental Protection Agency and the state Environmental Protection Division.

Across U.S. 17 from the facility, the EPA is monitoring cleanup efforts in the Terry Creek outfall ditch where toxaphene is being removed after the pesticide was produced at the facility in the 1960s and 1970s. It was banned in the United States in 1990.

Environmental remediation at the manufacturing facility is overseen by the EPD. Work there is underway to prevent human exposure to potentially harmful substances from Hercules' past operations such as toxaphene and volatile organic chemicals.

Those issues are well known to the leaders of the Urbana and Perry Park Neighborhood Planning Assembly. Anita Collins, chairman of the assembly, said everyone in the area is aware of the environmental mitigation efforts and years of EPD and EPA citations at the facility.

"It's not been good for the community in terms of environmental issues," Collins said.

Those issues have been, and will be, topics of conversation among the NPA and Collins said the group hopes to have a Pinova representative at upcoming meetings to discuss them.

"You're talking about generational damage," she said. "That is not going to be cleaned up overnight."

The NPA also began circulating a survey to residents and others prior to the announcement of the plant's closure to gauge the impact of the April 15 fire on the community.

"It's for our neighborhood, but damage from that fire did not just impact our neighborhood," Collins said.

The massive black plume of smoke from the blaze rode the wind for miles and impacted other communities on St. Simons Island and elsewhere, she said.

"I just hope everyone understands that it was a major disaster and...were just moments away from a horrible destruction if they had not extinguished it," Collins said.

After the fire and the closing of the plant, Collins and others in the neighborhood now want to know what the 18-month decommissioning of the plant will entail and how its reuse may impact residents.

"We have a lot of questions about the closing," Collins said. "What does that look like?"

Pinova officials have said they are focused first on the employees and helping them transition into new jobs. Potential reuse and the future of the facility will be addressed second, officials have said.

Collins and Brown don't want the site to become blighted and said the neighborhood will be very different without the plant operating daily.

"When something has been here for more than 100 years, for it to all of the sudden close, it will take some getting used to," Collins said.



Michael Hall