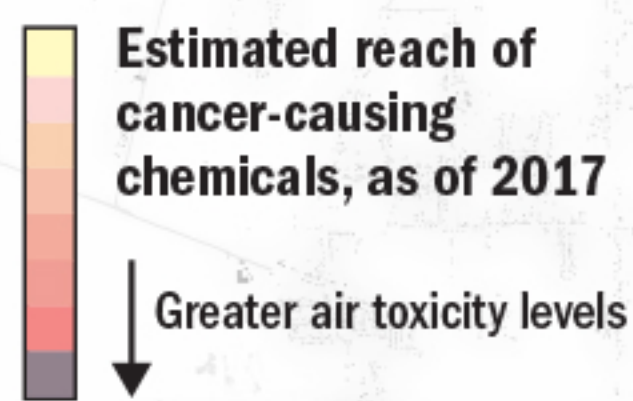


# Louisiana's Chemical Corridor

Since the late 1980s, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has been publishing the Toxics Release Inventory, which catalogs known releases of toxic chemicals by "major source" emitters. The releases are self-reported by companies. The EPA uses that data to create the Risk-Screening Environmental Indicators model, or RSEI, which uses modeling to map estimated toxic pollution in 810-by-810-meter squares across the country. The stretch along the Mississippi River between Baton Rouge and New Orleans has some of America's highest toxic levels of cancer-causing chemicals in the air. Some of the most polluted areas will become more so, thanks to a building boom in the petrochemical industry that is fueled by cheap natural gas.

## MAP LEGEND

- More than 200 existing facilities whose emissions are listed on the federal Toxics Release Inventory
- 7 permits granted since 2015 for construction or expansion of facilities that will be "major sources" of toxic air pollution, according to the EPA
- 5 project permits awaiting approval



Louisiana State Capitol building in Baton Rouge with the ExxonMobil refinery behind it. Staff photo by Richard Alan

## THE CAPITOL'S TOXIC NEIGHBOR

The massive ExxonMobil refinery in north Baton Rouge was built in 1909 and has loomed over the city since. ExxonMobil — which now operates five plants there — is the city's biggest taxpayer and one of its biggest employers. But complaints about toxic pollution from its campus have long dogged the company. Two years ago, ExxonMobil agreed to spend \$300 million to improve pollution controls at plants in Baton Rouge and Texas after the EPA and the Department of Justice said it violated the Clean Air Act by exceeding allowable thresholds for the emissions of certain carcinogens. Environmentalists said that the resolution, which included \$5 million in fines and mitigation, amounted to a slap on the wrist.



Chemicals burn following a plant explosion at Williams Geismar Olefins plant in 2015. Staff photo by Catherine Threlkeld

## THE GASES OF GEISMAR

Ascension Parish is No. 1 among American counties for the weight of toxic chemicals released from industrial stacks within its borders, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's annual Toxics Release Inventory. Most of the plants are clustered in Geismar; they include the Williams Olefins plant, which caught fire and exploded in 2013, killing two workers and injuring 167. The EPA in July ordered the company that owns the plant to pay \$750,000 in fines for violations of the Clean Air Act related to the accident.

## DILEMMA NEAR DENKA

The Denka Performance Elastomer plant, in Reserve, releases chloroprene — classified as a "likely carcinogen" by the EPA — into the atmosphere. EPA models have shown the area has the nation's highest airborne cancer risk, though state and plant officials dispute the models. Local officials are considering closing nearby Fifth Ward Elementary School; the state Department of Health, meanwhile, has said it will commission its own study on cancer risks in the area.



The Denka Performance Elastomer plant in Reserve. Staff photo by Matthew Hinton

## TOXIC HOTSPOT

ProPublica's analysis estimates the air toxicity levels from chemicals in this entire area (see graphic) is at or higher than the average level around the controversial Sterigenics facility in Willowbrook, Illinois, which was temporarily shut down by the Illinois EPA in early 2019. Sterigenics announced in September that the plant will close permanently.

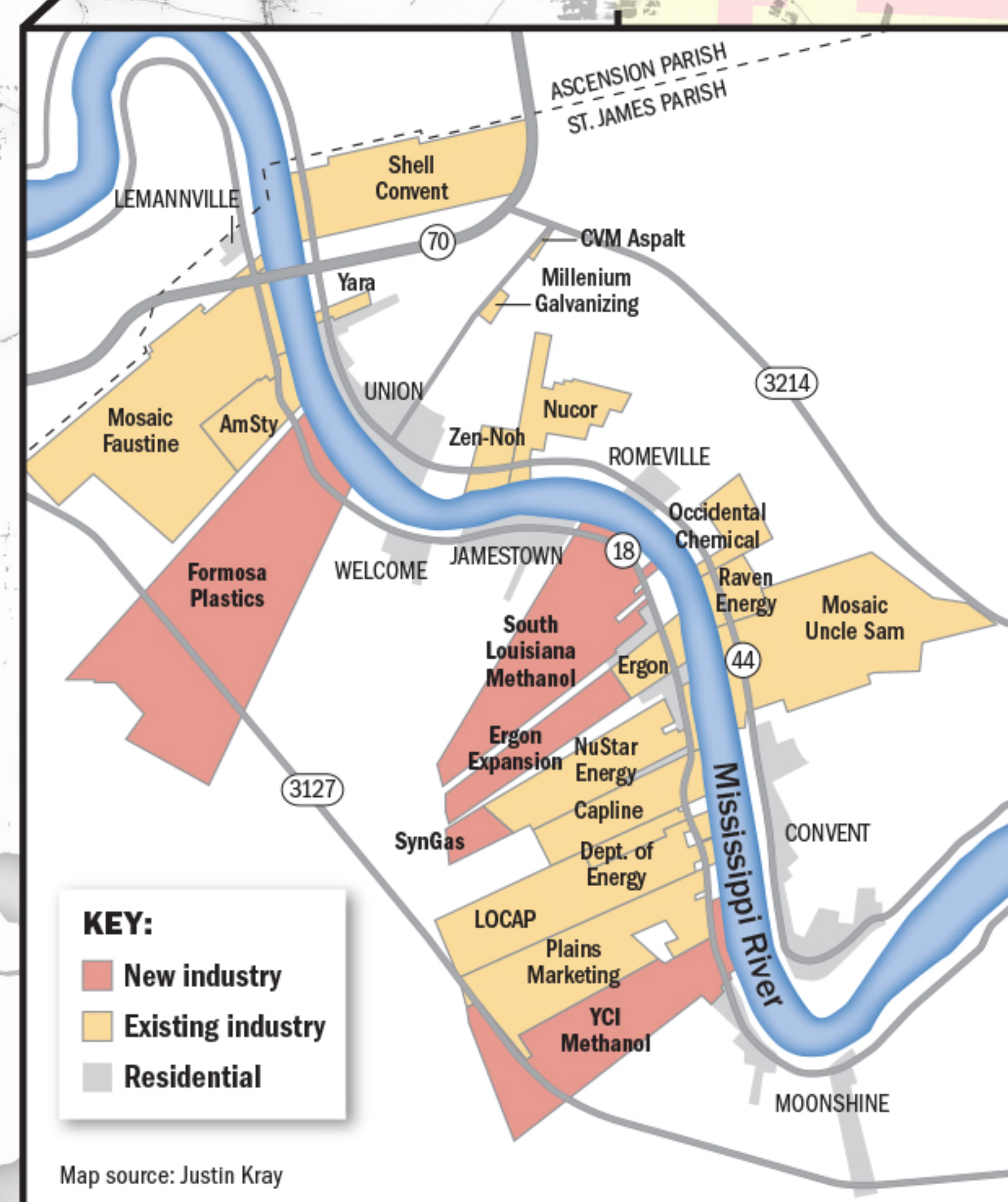


## HEAVY EMITTERS

**SHINTECH:** In 1994, the unincorporated community of St. Gabriel voted to become a city so it could control its own zoning code and decide whether companies would be allowed to build new plants. But air pollution does not recognize political boundaries. Near St. Gabriel's border, the existing Shintech chemical plant recently received a permit to undergo a massive expansion. Modeling estimates the plant will increase the toxic levels of chemicals in nearby Bayou Goula's air by an estimated 16%.

**BCP INGREDIENTS:** Even if St. Gabriel can control how many new plants are built, the young city cannot kick out existing ones. One such plant — BCP Ingredients Inc. — ranks among the top 10 plants in the country for creating high, toxic levels of cancer-causing chemicals, according to a ProPublica analysis of RSEI data.

Total Petrochemicals USA, foreground sits just inside the city limits of St. Gabriel along with a slew of other facilities. Staff photo by David Grunfeld



## CHEMICAL INDUSTRY GROWTH

Formosa Plastics plans to build a \$9.4 billion industrial complex on the rural west bank of St. James Parish. If permitted, the plant is expected to open by 2022. It will consist of 16 facilities and is expected to double the parish's emissions of toxic chemicals. The plant, if built, will be one of the largest and most expensive industrial developments in Louisiana history.



## THE CANS AND CANNOTS

Around 2014, two chemical companies — Petroplex and Wolverine — were barred from building new facilities inside and across the river from the predominantly white 3rd District. "It's a decision based on 'We don't want it in the white area but we don't mind it being in the black area,'" said Clyde Cooper, the 5th District council member. Jason Amato, the 2nd District council member said that he voted for projects in District 5 but against Wolverine and Petroplex due to safety. "I don't rubber stamp industry," Amato said. "I'm pro safe-industry."

Former site for the proposed Petroplex tank farm in Vacherie. Staff photo by David Mitchell



## UNION CARBIDE CLUSTER

Union Carbide's facilities in Taft and Hahnville, on the west bank of St. Charles Parish, produce ethylene oxide, which the EPA began classifying as a carcinogen in 2016. The amount of ethylene oxide released by the plants elevates the airborne cancer risk in the adjacent areas, including the section directly across the river. The EPA estimates the risk in that census tract, near Montz, is among the highest in the country.

The Union Carbide "Plant" near the Holy Rosary Cemetery in St. Charles Parish. Staff photo by Scott Threlkeld

## JEFFERSON AND ORLEANS PARISHES:

Although there are facilities within these parishes that produce toxic emissions, the analysis focused on the River Parishes and the region typically considered "Cancer Alley."