

Sasol's engagement with the community of Mossville

By listening to its neighbors, Sasol is helping to create positive outcomes for the people in Southwest Louisiana

It wasn't easy for Jackie Green to leave her hometown of Mossville, La. After all, she was born and raised in the small community near Lake Charles, and her family had been there for generations.

But the opportunity to move to a nice big house in the country – just a few miles southwest, in Carlyss, La., – was too good to pass up. So she joined many of her neighbors and sold her Mossville home to Sasol through its successful Voluntary Property Purchase Program (VPPP), using the proceeds to purchase her new home in Carlyss.

“Sasol's property purchase program has been a blessing to my family and so many others in Mossville,” said Green. “We're very grateful for the opportunity Sasol gave us, and for the way we've been treated throughout the process.”

The VPPP is just one element of an extensive, ongoing partnership between the people of Southwest Louisiana and Sasol, designed to provide sustainable, long-term support to strengthen local communities and increase economic opportunities for residents.

Looking forward, preserving the past

The historic community of Mossville traces its roots to the late 1700s. Although never incorporated, the community once boasted more than 600 residents, and many – like Green – were part of families that had called Mossville home for decades.

Of course, in the early days, no one could predict the area around Lake Charles would someday be home to one of the nation's largest industrial complexes. The first wave of development followed the creation of the ship channel; the next

wave of refineries and chemical plants were built to support the nation's World War II effort; a third wave occurred in the 1970s and '80s. Most recently, the dramatic growth in domestic supplies of low cost natural gas has re-energized U.S. petrochemical production and made Lake Charles a hot spot for expansion.

But as the petrochemical industry grew in Southwest Louisiana – drawn by the region's access to abundant natural gas supplies, its openness to business, its robust petrochemical infrastructure and its hard-working people – the plants themselves drew ever closer to Mossville. Today, nearly 20 manufacturers operate close to the community.

When Sasol began planning to build a multi-billion-dollar complex near its existing Lake Charles-area operations near Mossville and Westlake, company leaders initiated regular meetings with members of the community to gather feedback on their plans. One issue Mossville residents mentioned repeatedly was interest in the opportunity to sell their property to allow them to move.

Although Sasol's expansion plans did not require acquisition of property in Mossville, the company listened to residents and agreed to work with them to develop a generous and fair property purchase plan.

With substantial input from the Mossville community, the VPPP was initiated in 2013. It was designed to ensure residents received above-market value for their homes. Independent appraisers evaluated the properties and established fair prices by comparing the homes to recent sales in high-value areas of Calcasieu Parish. The offers typically amount to the appraised value of the property plus 40-60 percent, with a minimum appraised value of \$100,000 for owner-occupied homes. Other allowances and bonuses were available to help ease the burden of relocation.

Following the rollout of the VPPP, Sasol hosted monthly community meetings in Mossville to answer questions and help residents understand their options. In addition, a Sasol representative was available twice a week to meet individually with residents. And for homeowners with unique situations, program counselors offered one-on-one meetings to provide guidance.

The community's enthusiastic embrace of the program can be seen in the numbers – 80 percent of those eligible for the program registered to participate. And although a small percentage of property owners have inevitably desired more money than the program design allows, at the end of 2015, offers had been accepted on more than 550 properties.

“The Voluntary Property Purchase Program has been embraced by many of the citizens of Mossville,” said Butch Lemelle, another former Mossville resident and participant in the program. “A large number of them feel the program is a once in a lifetime opportunity to improve their circumstances.”

Preserving Mossville's History

The popularity of the VPPP raised another concern for the people of Mossville. If a large number of residents chose to move, leaving Mossville a smaller community, would people remember the larger community that Mossville had once been? They asked Sasol to help preserve Mossville's history, and the company responded.

Sasol enlisted the Imperial Calcasieu Museum to lead an in-depth research project that is capturing and preserving the written and oral history of the people and community of Mossville. To ensure that current and former residents had an opportunity to participate, the museum hosted a number of oral history days where individuals could share their stories and memories with trained historians.

"We've had artists come out of this community," said Vera Payne, a resident of Mossville and a member of the steering committee that helped guide the history project. "We've had professionals and sports people come out of this community. We even had a pilot that flew Air Force One that came from this community. I'd like for someone to remember these accomplishments."

Thanks to Sasol's support, the research on Mossville, including the oral histories, video and still images, will be available to the general public at the Imperial Calcasieu Museum and online through the libraries at Louisiana State University and McNeese State University.

The museum also plans to create a table-top book and a permanent exhibit featuring the history of the community.

“The history project was very important to the people of Mossville, and they wanted to do whatever they could to make certain that their community would not be forgotten,” said Susan Reed, executive director of the Imperial Calcasieu Museum. “Through the funding received from Sasol and the work of the project’s partners, the stories and memories of Mossville residents will now live on and be available to others for years to come. We are extremely proud to support this effort and help make the idea become a reality.”

Building an economic foundation

During the design of the VPPP, Sasol representatives met with a group of Mossville ministers who expressed an interest in helping their congregants improve their employment prospects.

Many of the people in Mossville and surrounding areas were under-employed, and lacked the technical skills necessary to benefit from the growth of the region’s petrochemical industry.

The ministers turned to Sasol for assistance. Could the company develop a program to provide resources and guidance to individuals looking for a career in local industry?

Working with a number of community partners, Sasol supported the development of a Workforce Resource Guide, a step-by-step manual to help individuals choose a career; acquire training, certification and life skills; prepare a resume; and ultimately, land a job in support of area industry.

“The Workforce Resource Guide is making a real difference in the lives of many Southwest Louisiana residents,” said Gabriel Morely, director of the Calcasieu Parish Library System, one of the initiative’s partner organizations. “The guide is easy to read and use, and it provides all the information people need to prepare for a job with local employers.”

Another request from area ministers was for help with job training and education. While the Workforce Resource Guide provided much-needed information, some local residents lacked the ability to pay for necessary classes or certification.

Working again with community partners, Sasol established a pilot scholarship fund that provides financial assistance to cover tuition, training costs, support services and human resources assistance for individuals participating in the Southwest Louisiana Workforce Resource Guide program. The scholarship effort is designed to support the unemployed and underemployed populations in the Mossville and Westlake communities.

To date, more than 50 individuals have received support through the scholarship program, and \$340,000 has been awarded. Each scholarship is tailored specifically to the recipient, providing the support they need – even non-educational assistance such as child care and transportation.

Thanks to Sasol and its community partners, the scholarship recipients are currently working through their way through a variety of technical training courses that will position them to work as welders, pipefitters, and operators as well as other well-paying jobs that are in demand locally.

One of those recipients is Paul Leger from Lake Charles, who received a scholarship from the program to attend technical training that is preparing him for a job as a welder.

“My dream is to be a pipeline worker, and I’m also going to go to school to do underwater work,” he said. “I’m really living my dream and doing what I want to do to support my family.”

The scholarship program does more than just provide funds. It removes many of the obstacles that make it difficult for underemployed individuals to obtain the training and skills they need.

“Being a part of the scholarship program changes the perception of these individuals,” said Stephanie Seemion of the Calcasieu Business and Career Solutions Center, which helped implement the program. “They are no longer seen

as high-risk because the program is working with them every step of the way to help them succeed.”

Sasol also partnered with local business development organizations to create a Small Business Resource Guide that provides in-depth information on starting a new business and guidelines for providing goods and services to the major industrial companies in the area. The goal is to connect entrepreneurs and small businesses with the organizations and programs that are already in place to serve them – and eventually, improve their capacity to work with area industry as a vendor or contractor.

Included in this effort was a business opportunity forum, sponsored by Sasol, which brought together 800 representatives from local businesses – large and small – to meet with one another and discover opportunities. Several small- and mid-sized businesses gained valuable contracts thanks to connections they made at the forum.

Investments that make a difference

These unique community investments are long-term efforts specifically designed to meet the needs of the people of Southwest Louisiana and Calcasieu Parish.

“Members of the community spoke, and we listened,” said Paul Hippman, vice president of US Chemicals Operations for Sasol. “We engaged with people here – individuals, community and civic leaders, small business owners, educators, ministers and others – and they told us what the community’s needs were. We responded with customized programs that are making a very real difference in the lives of our neighbors, and we’re proud of the impact we’ve had. But this isn’t a one-time effort. We will continue to have dialog with our neighbors and we’ll continue to look for ways that we can make Southwest Louisiana a better place to live and work.”

“Early in the process of attempting to understand the community needs and how to address them, we met with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s Office of Environmental Justice,” said Mike Hayes, Sasol’s public affairs manager. “Their advice was to behave as though we are visitors in the community. That was the

best advice we received. We have listened and responded to the needs of the community. While satisfying everyone's desires is impossible, working with the community to make a positive difference is always first and foremost.

"The most frequent feedback we hear from our community," said Hayes, "can be summed up in two words: thank you. 'Thank you for engaging us, listening to us, and giving us the opportunity to move. Thank you for preserving our history. Thank you for helping our unemployed and underemployed residents learn how to enter the workforce. Thank you for helping our residents get the training they need to get a job in support of area industry. And thank you for helping local small business owners and entrepreneurs take advantage of a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.'"

"If you were to write a handbook about how to do what is right in a community or for a community," said State Representative Mike Danahay, a Democrat who represents Mossville, "Sasol has written that handbook."
