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## Church site is environmental success

Progressive's prayers answered in cleanup

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By **Andrea Shaw**  
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When Progressive Church began buying 18 acres across the street from its sanctuary five years ago, the congregation knew that it was just furthering its efforts to make its Marrero neighborhood a better place.

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On this huge tract, bordered by Fourth and Cohen streets, the West Bank Expressway and Garden Drive, the church would build a family life center complete with a number of amenities that neighbors said would improve their quality of life.

"This is a center of hope to give people hope in life," pastor Sterling Mealancon said.

But when contractors began to dig on the site that was a former junkyard, they unearthed an asbestos problem that would take five years of negotiation and remediation and hundreds of thousands of dollars to fix.

That's why the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality recently recognized Progressive for its work and awarded the church a Citation for Brownfields Excellence on Nov. 2. The project took 10 months and cost \$500,000.

"We were in a 50-day prayer campaign. The day we ended our prayer campaign was the day they finished the cleanup," Mealancon said.

"Projects like this one, that clean up the environment, make property usable for business, create

new jobs and help build the community are good for the state," DEQ Secretary Harold Leggett said in a news release.

EPA Regional Administrator Richard E. Greene said that the project exemplifies how federal, state and local agencies can work together to return contaminated property back to commerce.

"EPA continues to use the Brownfields program to stimulate environmental and economic success in our communities," Greene said in a news release.

State DEQ officials also recognized the Regional Planning Commission and Waldemar S. Nelson for their participation in the project.

Mealancon said that the church hopes to break ground early next year on the \$6 million Family Life Center, and that he's pushing for a completion date by late 2009. The 55,000-square-foot facility will house a worship center, classrooms, meeting rooms, a fitness center, a cafeteria and other amenities.

Ultimately, the church wants to make over the community that Mealancon said was overrun with crime and blight when he began pastoring at Progressive 12 years ago.

"When I started here, they used to have prostitutes walking up and down the street and there were drugs," he said.

Now "I see children playing on the street. I see community people walking. I think people have something they can feel proud of," he said of the church's efforts to build homes in the neighborhood and to demolish and rehab derelict buildings.

Jefferson Parish Council Chairman John Young, who met Mealancon in 2003 when he first ran for council, applauded the pastor and his congregation for their work.

Mealancon's "got this vision and he just keeps moving forward," Young said. "He rolls up his sleeves up and gets something done. It's true of his entire church."

Part of the money for the Brownfields cleanup was a \$300,000 revolving loan through the Regional Planning Commission, for which Young is chairman.

"The good news is once it's paid back, it will be available for other projects," he said, adding that another church has inquired about the money to remediate some property.

The Family Life Center, which is expected to create at least 40 jobs, is yet another building block in a neighborhood that is transforming itself and will "give our youth some positive reinforcement," Young said.

"We're not building a building," Mealancon said. "We're building a life for people."

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