

Lower Mississippi Delta Case Study

West Feliciana Parish, Louisiana

In the Lower Mississippi Delta, nestled between the Mississippi border and the Mississippi River, is West Feliciana Parish (Figure 5.4). Feliciana means “happy land” in Spanish. The parish is situated approximately 70 miles north of New Orleans and 30 miles from the state capital, Baton Rouge. West Feliciana is characterized by its sprawling landscape, expansive farmland, and mysterious aura in a place where cotton once was king. The presence of tall oak trees draped with Spanish moss and old shotgun homes makes one feel as though she has traveled back in time. Structures such as the newly constructed elementary schools and middle school and the McDonald’s on Route 61 seem like anachronisms in this parish that appears to exist in a time warp.

West Feliciana is located in “Plantation Country” in Louisiana with a history steeped in the Civil War and the slave trade. Early settlers of the area became cotton planters on an enormous scale. The parish’s history is

FIGURE 5.4



still alive in the several antebellum homes and plantations, many of which have been renovated and turned into bed and breakfast facilities. One of the best known plantations in the parish is Rosedown Plantation. At its largest, it was comprised of 3,455 acres and had as many as 450 slaves.³³

St. Francisville is the largest town in the parish with 1,712 residents. In downtown St. Francisville, the first wife of Jefferson Davis is buried at the Locust Grove Cemetery. Tourism is a growth industry in the town, and in 1999 the St. Francisville Welcome Center counted 50,030 tourists. Maintaining the town’s historical features has become a priority for the residents of St. Francisville. A survey of the old buildings in the downtown area was conducted over 30 years ago.

As a result of the survey, more than 140 structures were placed on the National Register of Historic Places. In 1993, the town chose to become a Main Street Community in order to enhance the town’s historic preservation. This program allows the historic buildings to receive grants and sponsors various programs that are held in the downtown area.³⁴

FIGURE 5.5

West Feliciana Parish Quick Facts, 2000

	West Feliciana	Louisiana
2000 Population	15,111	4,468,976
Population Change 1990-2000	17%	5.9%
Population African American	50.5%	32.5%
Median Household Income	\$39,667	\$32,566
Female-Headed Households	15.6%	16.6%
Persons Below Poverty	19.9%	19.6%
Homeownership Rate	74.5%	67.9%
Cost Burdened	15.9%	25.2%
Crowded	8.0%	5.2%
Lacking Complete Plumbing	0.7%	0.6%
Lacking Complete Kitchen	0.9%	0.6%



West Feliciana Parish is located in the heart of plantation country in Louisiana.

Population Characteristics

According to the 2000 Census, West Feliciana Parish is inhabited by 15,111 people, an increase of 17 percent since 1990 (Figure 5.5). The racial composition of the parish can generally be described as half black and half white. Slightly more than 50 percent of the population is African American, while 48.6 percent of the residents are white. Although racial strife in the parish is not overt, there is a distinct separation of the races. The neighborhoods in the parish are highly segregated, and the local high school, as of spring 2002, still hosts two proms: one black and one white.

Louisiana is a unique state in that it has parishes that are governed in most cases by police juries. Parishes correspond to counties and police juries to county boards of commissioners or similar local governing bodies in other states. The West Feliciana police jury is comprised of seven jurors who represent the seven districts in the parish. Four of the jurors are white, and the remaining three are black. In 1992, the only black juror at that time, along with the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), filed a lawsuit against the police jury to add three additional jurors so that the three majority black districts in the parish could be accurately represented. The parish spent \$260,000 fighting the lawsuit, which it eventually lost, and two additional seats were added to the jury.³⁵

West Feliciana Parish is classified by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service as a persistent poverty county. Approximately 20 percent of the population in West Feliciana Parish lives below the poverty line.

Economic Conditions

The median income for West Feliciana Parish is \$39,667. The Parish's unemployment rate is 5 percent, which is slightly higher than the national rate of 4.2 percent.

The parish's relatively low unemployment rate and high income can be attributed to the increased investment in the area. The parish offers promising opportunities for new business development and investment. The largest employer is the Louisiana State Penitentiary (LSP) at Angola, with nuclear energy resources and paper manufacturing following behind.³⁶ Pulp and paper products, education, and medical services follow to comprise the growing economic base of the parish. Small businesses, especially wholesale, retail, and service sectors, are integral parts of the local economy. Small business accounts for 19.3 percent of employment in the parish.



Lack of an adequate supply of affordable housing forces many low-income families in West Feliciana to live in substandard housing such as this dilapidated unit.

The Louisiana State Penitentiary (LSP) at Angola employs approximately 1,800 people.³⁷ It was originally an 8,000 acre plantation named for the native land of the slaves that worked on the plantation. Once known as the "bloodiest prison in America," it now has a reputation as being progressive and well managed.³⁸ It has also been the site of award winning films and documentaries, such as "Dead Man Walking," "The Farm," and "Angola Prison Rodeo – The Wildest Show in the South." LSP is the largest prison in the world (in land area), sitting on 18,000 acres of land. LSP houses approximately 5,108 inmates and employs approximately 1,505 correctional officers. Most of the inmates work eight hours a day, five days a week in the farm lines, processing four million pounds of vegetables annually.³⁹ Although LSP employs more people in the parish than any other employer, many employees commute from neighboring parishes.

Tembec Paper Mill is the second largest employer in the parish, with approximately 760 employees.⁴⁰ Tembec manufactures value-added papers for printing, publishing, and specialty packaging. The products are tailored for the special needs of target markets. The mill was previously owned by a company that filed for bankruptcy in 2000. In 2001, it was sold to Tembec Inc., a Montreal forest-products company.⁴¹

Entergy Corporation's River Bend nuclear power plant began operating in 1986. It employs about 750 people.⁴² In addition to being a major employer, Entergy has also been the source of 83 percent of the parish's property taxes. Since its industrial tax exemptions expired at the end of 1996, the 936-megawatt plant has

been generating between \$13 million and \$14 million annually in property tax revenues for West Feliciana Parish. That equals about \$894 for each resident in the parish. When the 5,000 inmates at Louisiana State Penitentiary are discounted, the per capita payment increases significantly to about \$1,355. The value of Entergy's property accounts for approximately 81 percent of the parish's total assessments. The next largest taxpayer in the parish, the paper mill, accounts for only about 7 percent.⁴³

Despite the economic growth in the parish, approximately 20 percent of the population lives in poverty. This high rate indicates that the recent economic prosperity has not been shared by all. The large number of poor residents is one of the reasons why the need for affordable housing continues.

Housing Conditions

There is a dire need for the development of more affordable housing in West Feliciana Parish. While the construction of new market-rate homes seems to be constant, these new homes are targeted for medium- and upper-income households. There are only two subsidized housing projects in the entire parish. They provide a total of 63 affordable apartments that were developed using Section 515 funding and 50 single-family homes that were developed using Section 502. One of these housing developments is Hardwood Apartments, which is notorious for its high level of crime and run-down appearance.

The lack of additional units forces low-income families to rely on substandard single-family homes, mobile homes, and dilapidated shacks. According to

2000 Census data, there are 2,741 occupied housing units in the parish, with 1,869 of them being owner-occupied and 872 renter-occupied.

Housing affordability is a major issue in the parish. The fair market rents for one-, two- and three-bedroom apartments are \$418, \$521, and \$706 a month, respectively. While these rents are affordable to families making the median income, 22.3 percent of individuals in West Feliciana Parish earn under \$15,000 a year and 14.8 percent earn under \$10,000 a year. Paying the fair market rent for even a one-bedroom apartment would make these individuals cost-burdened.⁴⁴

There are, on the other hand, examples of successful housing developments in the parish. In the traditionally black neighborhood of Solitude, a private developer constructed Turner Subdivision, consisting of numerous small lots with single-family homes that qualify for Federal Housing Administration, Department of Veterans Affairs, and commercial home loans.

London's Boarding Home, Recreation, and Rehabilitation Training Facilities, Inc. (LBH) was established in 1990 to provide transportation to work for low-income people. Funding for this program was provided by the police jury in the parish, along with a matching grant from the U.S. Department of Transportation. However, the police jury discontinued the funding for the program and affordable housing became the main focus of LBH. The organization later became a Community Housing Development Organization (CHDO), and in 1998 LBH developed Feliciana Hills Apartments, a 40-unit apartment complex for low- and moderate-income families. LBH leveraged funds from the Louisiana Housing and Finance Agency, HOME funds, and Low Income Housing Tax Credits to develop the housing.



"Shotgun houses" are prevalent in the Mississippi Delta, including West Feliciana Parish.



Quality housing can be found in the historically African-American neighborhood called Solitude.

The complex was constructed by a for-profit developer and provides two-, three- and four-bedroom apartments. It is currently filled to capacity with a waiting list of 20 families. LBH is trying to purchase the adjacent land to develop additional affordable housing units. The organization has discovered that finding funding for these projects is the largest obstacle.⁴⁵

LBH is concerned about the development's proximity to Hardwood Apartments and has on many occasions had to force Hardwood residents loitering on its property to leave. A police officer resides in Feliciana Hills and patrols the area. Hardwood subdivision, developed in 1972, has a reputation as a high-crime housing development.⁴⁶ The situation at Hardwood Apartments has not substantively changed since HAC's visit in the early 1990s. LBH is taking steps to ensure that it learns from Hardwood's mistakes.

Another organization interested in developing safe and affordable housing in West Feliciana Parish is the Quad Area Community Action Agency, Inc. The agency is headquartered in Hammond, Louisiana, and there is an office in the parish, run by one staff person. Quad Area is also a CHDO and offers numerous services, including transportation, energy assistance, housing counseling, emergency funds, emergency food and shelter, and low-interest loans for home repairs. Quad Area is attempting to develop affordable housing in West Feliciana Parish and is meeting opposition by the local government there. The organization believes that the police jury's priority is in capital improvement projects and renovation projects. Quad Area also senses a not in my backyard (NIMBY) reaction in the parish — that many people feel that the development of affordable housing will draw poor people into the parish, while Quad Area is in the pursuit of developing housing for those who already live there. The organization plays a large role in providing services to the poor people in the parish and will continue to fight for more housing in the area.⁴⁷

Significant Developments

Education

West Feliciana Parish has made gains in improving its public education system. The parish's school system is noted as being one of the best in the state, with high teacher salaries, improving test scores, capital outlay programs, and community support. Fifty-five percent of West Feliciana's faculty have obtained masters degrees or higher. The student attendance record is 94 percent, which is also higher than the state average. The school system uses its money for required reading programs for kindergarteners and first through third grade students, provides technology to motivate older students, and offers college preparation and vocational courses in its high school.⁴⁸

The public schools boast of outstanding test scores, ranking high in the state, and often scoring above the national average. West Feliciana third graders ranked second in the state on the Iowa Basic Skills Test, while eighth grade students are number one in the state, based on national tests that include the subject areas of English language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies.⁴⁹ These accomplishments should put students on the right path to raise the parish's comparatively low educational attainment rate. The percent of West Feliciana's population (aged 25 and over) with a high school diploma or higher was 53.3 percent in 2000, compared to 74.8 percent at the state level.

Housing

Many forces in West Feliciana Parish recognize the need for change and have a vision for the future that includes the development of housing for the rural poor. One of them is the West Feliciana Community Development Foundation (CDF), which was founded in 1999 to diversify the economy in the parish, create jobs, and maintain the quality of life. CDF considers itself to be a catalyst and facilitator for affordable housing in the



Feliciana Hills Apartments provide one-, two- and three-bedroom units to low- and moderate-income families in the parish.

parish. However, it has had difficulty finding developable land in the parish. CDF staff have noticed that in the past ten years, the economic gap in the county has widened and more expensive homes have been built. CDF is trying to help the community build its capacity. Various types of assessments have been done for the community, including one by the United Way and a technical assistance plan completed by the Housing Assistance Council for CDF. However, CDF has not advanced to the implementation or analysis stage of the plans. It has developed an Affordable Housing Task Force, which has met every month since 2000. The group consists of approximately 18 active members of the community, including the school superintendent, the president of the local bank, local government leaders, and leaders of local nonprofit organizations.⁵⁰

CDF has found that the obstacles that stand in the way of developing affordable housing in the parish include the perception of affordable housing, NIMBY attitudes, and different opinions pertaining to whether housing can be considered a part of economic development. Although the parish lacks a local housing authority, CDF staff know that their housing goals for the parish can be accomplished without one. However, they also feel that in the past ten years there has been no consistent vision for positive change in the parish.⁵¹

Happi Landiers, Inc. was one of the first nonprofit organizations in West Feliciana Parish. It was started in 1955 by a group of teachers. These teachers raised money to provide services for children, such as dental care and medical care, and they also sponsored the Boy Scouts. In the early 1980s, Happi Landiers began receiving funding from the police jury. After that ended, Happi Landiers approached the United Way for funding and in 1985 it became a United Way agency. The activities of the organization have grown to include after school tutoring, summer day camp, mentoring for elementary school boys, food services for senior

citizens, and assistance with utilities and rent payments. Happi Landiers is collaborating with Quad Area and CDF to establish more affordable housing in the parish. The organization is in the process of searching for available land in St. Francisville.⁵²

While the aforementioned organizations are fighting a battle in the parish to make way for affordable housing, some residents and advocates believe that local government leaders are setting their sights on expensive capital improvement projects. Property taxes from the River Bend nuclear power plant will be used for numerous projects including renovation of the courthouse; construction of a courthouse annex, a recreation complex, a public swimming pool, and a public safety complex; and a capital outlay program for the parish public schools.⁵³ The parish has taken advantage of the tax windfall by purchasing police equipment, increasing the sheriff's staff, and constructing a new fire station, training center, and administration building.⁵⁴ While the parish is concentrating its efforts on multi-million dollar projects, some residents believe that the needs of the poor residents in their community are not receiving the attention that is needed.

Conclusion

West Feliciana Parish is a dynamic area that is dealing with numerous issues. The previous *Taking Stock* report noted the persistent poverty in the parish but also the hope for improvement brought about by revenues from the River Bend power plant. Upon returning to West Feliciana Parish, HAC sees definite signs of progress. While the parish is prospering in many respects, with growing incomes and an emerging tourism industry, poor people in the parish are still suffering. New homes are being developed in the parish, but most of them are far out of the reach of low- and moderate-income families. Some residents believe that local government has given priority to expensive capital improvement projects over affordable housing.

Over the past few years, several organizations have formed with the hope of creating opportunities for the rural poor in West Feliciana. Organizations such as LBH, CDF, and Happi Landiers have faced community resistance to affordable housing and a difficulty in acquiring land due to NIMBY reactions. These groups have also found that obtaining the necessary resources to make a change in the parish is extremely difficult. They believe their efforts have often fallen on deaf ears in the local government and most likely they will have to continue to rely on their own innovative ideas to implement their goals and objectives.