

# THE MUTUAL BENEFITS OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

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## INTRODUCTION

When a company engages the local community in a caring and compassionate manner over a long period of time, the resulting relationships can produce a positive and mutually beneficial outcome—opposite of the problems generally associated with environmental justice. Of course, no amount of community engagement can overcome a manufacturing facility's poor operating performance. But with a foundation of safe, reliable operations, open and honest community engagement can produce enormous benefit for the company and neighbors alike.

Jackson County is Mississippi's undisputed industrial capital. Located in the extreme southeast corner of the state, it is the home of the state's largest employer in Ingalls Shipbuilding and the state's largest single private investment in Chevron's Pascagoula Refinery.

Chevron, originally under the name Standard Oil of Kentucky, was the darling of Mississippi economic development in the early 1960s. The Mississippi Constitution was changed to allow the company to purchase sixteenth section land;<sup>1</sup> and in 1961, Mississippi Governor Ross Barnett helped turn the first shovel of dirt beginning construction of what is today Chevron's largest wholly-owned petroleum refinery.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> MISS. CONST. art. 8, § 211.

<sup>2</sup> *Chevron Pascagoula Refinery: History*, CHEVRON, <http://pascagoula.chevron.com/home/abouttherefinery/history.aspx> (last visited Jan. 30, 2012).

Over the past decade, the Pascagoula refinery's community engagement program was defined by two "bookend" education initiatives that targeted potential employees and the very young. In the following few paragraphs, I will attempt to describe these two programs as examples of beneficial community engagement.

### I. WORK FORCE DEVELOPMENT

The refinery's nearest neighbors are those well-to-do folks who reside mostly along and near Beach Boulevard, in south Pascagoula. However, over the last forty-five years, residents of Pascagoula and those of nearby Moss Point have, on the whole, become more ethnically diverse and more economically disadvantaged.

At the same time, Pascagoula refinery employees are some of the highest paid in the area, and Chevron jobs are both renowned and desirable. It is common for several thousand eager applicants to apply for no more than thirty operator or mechanic positions. In 1990, almost three-fourths of refinery employees resided in Jackson County, while twenty-eight percent commuted from nearby Mobile County in Alabama. Today, thirty-eight percent reside in Alabama. There are likely many reasons for this demographic trend. Certainly, hurricanes have motivated some to relocate to the higher ground in Mobile County, and improvements in roads over time have made it practical to commute longer distances. Regardless of the reasons, potential job candidates residing nearest to the refinery had to compete with Alabamians, who were not neighbors to the refinery.

Given these trends in both the community and at Chevron, it was reasonable to predict the refinery and its neighbors would become increasingly isolated from each other. This possibility was unacceptable to Chevron, and in 2006, the company took action in support of hometown employee candidates. Chevron partnered with the Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College to establish a new program in petrochemical technology at the college's Gautier campus.<sup>3</sup> Chevron footed the \$320,000 bill for laboratory equipment and made refinery trainers available to the program.

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<sup>3</sup> *MGCCC Teams With Chevron on Petrochemical Technology Program*, WLOX, <http://www.wlox.com/Global/story.asp?S=5050629> (last visited Jan. 30, 2012).

The college hired two Chevron retirees as instructors, and Chevron provided tuition scholarships and opportunities for summer interns. A news story in the local paper described the program and Chevron ran ads in local media.

The table was set, and—as predicted—the first class of students were all from the local area and very talented. There was one problem: the class had no visible diversity. This prompted Chevron to take the issue to a member of the local African American Ministerial Alliance, and as a result of this meeting, Chevron was honored to accept the pastor's invitation to speak during a Sunday morning service. A member of Chevron's training department explained to the congregation the details of the community college program and how it was closely connected with Chevron's employment process. Chevron also made adjustments to its scholarship program to target minorities. Today, the program has become so successful (and popular) that for the first time in over twenty years the percentage of Chevron employees who reside locally has increased. Chevron and the college are currently developing a parallel program for employee candidates in the important area of maintenance services.

## II. EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

While Chevron's focus on workforce training has had a clear impact on local employment, early childhood education has the potential to impact the long-term success of all children, whether they work for Chevron or not. The Pascagoula refinery became interested in early education in 2001 and sponsored and facilitated a planning meeting for early education experts from across Mississippi. From this meeting the idea of a community certification program that promoted early childhood education was born. For the next several years, Chevron worked closely with Mississippi State University's Early Childhood Institute and others to forge a program that was eventually named Excel By 5.<sup>4</sup>

By late 2004, with the support of First Lady Marsha Barbour, a \$650,000 grant from Chevron, and a grant from the Phil Hardin Foundation, an Excel By 5 pilot program began in the Mississippi

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<sup>4</sup> *Our Story*, EXCEL BY 5, <http://www.excelby5.com/about/ourstory.php> (last visited Jan. 30, 2012).

communities of Pascagoula, Petal, West Point, and Cleveland. As defined by Excel By 5, each community identified a lead agency and formed a broad-based coalition that was responsible for meeting Excel By 5 certification requirements. These requirements were grouped in four areas: community involvement, parent training and support, child care, and health.

Excel By 5 certification takes a community about two years to complete. Petal was the first, followed by West Point, and then Pascagoula and finally Cleveland. During the pilot phase, the Walker Foundation approached Chevron and offered to sponsor Excel By 5 in an area of Mid-Jackson where it was already actively involved. Then the Gilmore Foundation sponsored Excel By 5 for all of Monroe County, and with the support of the Kellogg Foundation the Mississippi Center for Education Innovation sponsored a large part of the Mississippi Delta. More recently, the Community Foundation of Northwest Mississippi volunteered to sponsor Excel By 5 in the high growth area south of Memphis.

Today, seven Mississippi communities have attained Excel By 5 certification and about thirty more are in the pipeline. Current Excel By 5 certified communities are Biloxi, Petal, Pascagoula, West Point, Monroe County, Moss Point, and Cleveland. Excelebrate!

Excel By 5 is bringing focus to the importance of early childhood education, and it's growing grassroots leaders who are passionate about supporting young children and their parents. Excel By 5 was recently incorporated as a new non-profit organization, and in 2010, Chevron made a five-year, \$750,000 commitment to Excel By 5.

In conclusion, community engagement is an important component to the long-term success of a manufacturing facility. It involves strong relationships built on open and honest communication. It is about getting involved and building trust. It is being willing to listen and respond. Community engagement is mostly about leadership.