AlterNet [1] / *By Rachel Morello-Frosch [2], Manuel Pastor [3]*

Richmond: Looking to a New, Greener Future

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Editor's Note: This is part of series, Facing the Climate Gap [4], which looks at grassroots efforts in California low-income communities of color to address climate change and promote climate justice.

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The Chevron Corporation is among the oldest "residents" of Richmond, California, but Reverend Kenneth Davis is looking forward to a day when the community is not dependent upon the oil giant.

"Chevron's been here for over 100 years, but if I lived in a perfect world I would have a world where we didn't have to be so dependent upon as we are on petroleum. I would have a green world; one that we could use solar and wind and all the other technologies; we'd be able to exist without filling up our gas tank," says Davis.

In Richmond, community members like Davis are attempting to curb the negative effects of the petrochemical industry in their city by striving for a *just transition*. This policy framework addresses environmental, social and economic inequalities by using community-based planning to create long-term, sustainable alternatives to environmentally-damaging industries. Ultimately, community members would like to see the city turn away from its dependence on the fossil fuel industry and its deleterious health effects while providing improved living and working environments.

The *just transition* goal gained momentum in 2007 when the neighborhoods surrounding Chevron's oil refinery organized to oppose the company's proposal to expand its oil refining capacity. Because of increased energy demand, increased costs and anxiety about oil supply, oil companies are turning to "unconventional," heavier crude oil with higher sulfur content which also generates more pollution during refining.

Asian Pacific Environmental Network (APEN) [6], Communities for a Better Environment [7] (CBE) and West County Toxics Coalition [8] collaborated to oppose Chevron's expansion in the belief that it would make the community's survival dependent on the production of this dirtier crude oil without having the technology to reduce pollution levels.

Despite the opposition, the city council approved the Chevron expansion proposal. So the coalition of environmental justice advocates responded with a lawsuit in 2008 and argued that Chevron failed to disclose its true intentions to refine higher-sulfur crude oil and thus, did not provide proper assessment and mitigation of health impacts under the Environmental Impact Report. In 2010, the California Court of Appeals deemed Chevron's Environmental Review Report inadequate, stopping the expansion in its tracks.

APEN executive director, Roger Kim says the Chevron victory marked the beginning of a new future for Richmond.

"The expansion of Chevron and the infrastructure that they were trying to put into the ground would have kept Richmond locked into dirty oil for generations to come. We needed to head that off in order to even have the semblance of a future where Richmond could be cleaner and more environmentally just," says Kim.

There is no clear formula for a just transition, but Richmond's strategy has four basic tenets: first, a reduction of greenhouse gas emissions by major industrial polluters; second, community-led city planning that creates modes of sustainable and equitable economic development; third, political structures that are committed to the plight of local residents; and fourth, developing alternative modes of energy generation and consumption – all of which help to redistribute power and build a more sustainable community.

The community's relationship with Chevron is complicated. The Chevron Oil Refinery in Richmond was established in 1902 and is the oldest and third largest refinery in California, producing nearly 250,000 barrels per day. The refinery also provides between 1,950 and 2,460 jobs, making it the largest employer and property tax payer in the city.

Former CBE organizer Jessica Tovar acknowledges this relationship. She says this dependence on the Chevron Corporation is why the community cannot merely oppose the refinery, but must work to find alternatives.

"We are interested in having alternative forms of energy and fuel, and we should be spending more of our time and resources researching those and making those happen in our community," says Tovar.

Richmond is an ethnically diverse community composed of nearly 80 percent people of color, including African-Americans, Laotians and Latinos. It is also a community where more than a third of the city's households earn less than $35,000 annually. Meanwhile, Richmond children are hospitalized for asthma at a much higher than average rate and adults experience higher than average rates of heart disease, cancer and stroke.

It's not just Chevron, of course: nearly 350 industrial sites including auto dismantlers, chemical manufacturers, waste incinerators and the Chevron facility surround the community, contribute to both greenhouse gas emissions and other forms of air pollution. And many see a direct correlation between these industries and the precarious health of the community. Davis, the reverend and member of East Bay Coalition of Concerned Citizens, says that though he has no issue with capitalist success, the community is suffering.

"My community is bearing the brunt of their wealth…They take theirs to the bank and I'm a minister and I have to take mine to the graveyard," says Davis.

These issues of "cumulative exposure" occur in many low-income communities in California – and have prompted environmental justice groups in both San Diego (Environmental Health Coalition) and Los Angeles (Clean Up, Green Up coalition) to call for separating incompatible land uses and creating "green zones" in which industrial pollutants would be reduced and high quality jobs enhanced.

Richmond activists are pushing for just that sort of vision, arguing that what's needed is a "just transition." APEN and CBE members are taking it upon themselves to become Richmond's just transition and sustainability planners. Residents have become involved in the city's *General Plan* and have most recently included and *Energy and Climate Change*and *Community Health and Wellness* elements to the plan.

Community involvement has also created a political shift in a city that Kim (of APEN) says was largely influenced by Chevron.

"Richmond, for 100 years, has been a company town. It has been owned by Chevron; they owned the mayor, they owned the city council, they owned the planning commission" says Kim.

However, in the last city council election in 2010 every candidate that Chevron supported lost, creating a sharp, progressive shift. Kim says this change will set Richmond on a "different path toward a sustainable future and green economy.

The shift is not merely political; social enterprises have also been gaining ground in Richmond. Solar Richmond [9] was created in 2006 by Richmond resident Michele McGeoy and offers solar installation training for underemployed and low-income residents, staff placement for solar companies and has also created a worker-owned clean energy cooperative.

Solar Richmond is also supporting the Richmond's just transition by inspiring youth to participate in the green movement. In partnership with the East Bay Green Jobs Corps, Solar Richmond provides young adults with customer service, sales and outreach skills in addition to solar installation training. "If you teach somebody how to find a rafter in a roof, and how to hang an inverter then they know how to find a rafter in a roof and hang an inverter, but if you teach someone customer service skills and sales skills, and a deep understanding about why this green movement is happening, there are many more doors that will be open in any green company," says McGeoy.

Solar Richmond has also worked to include residents and City officials in the move toward a green and equitable economy. With City and Federal support, the company has implemented a solar panel rebate program by providing education and solar installations in low-income neighborhoods. The program has helped Richmond become first for watts per capita and second for total watts generated among Bay Area cities.

Additionally, the worker-owner cooperative formed by Solar Richmond hires graduates from its ranks to perform commercial-scale solar installations. The co-op business model allows workers to become owners and, according to McGeoy, creates not only a "pathway out of poverty but really into prosperity."

Successful green jobs programs are have also gained traction in other parts of the state. The Los Angeles Conservation Corps (LACC), for instance, trains and employs over 1,000 young adults in rain water collection systems, solar installations, and landscape design programs while also helping them finish high school.

Another example: Strategic Concepts in Organizing and Policy Education [10] (SCOPE) headed up the APOLLO Alliance – a coalition of community, labor, and environmental organizations – to persuade the City of Los Angeles to pass its first Green Retrofit and Workforce Program in 2006. By 2009, the City began a pilot program that set the goal to retrofit 100 city-owned buildings to conserve energy and keep city workers – who would otherwise be laid off – employed.

The pieces for a just transition are seemingly falling into place in Richmond and Los Angeles, largely due to grassroots community organizing by those most affected by the effects of climate change. But the need goes well beyond one or two cities: as Kim of APEN notes, "What is missing is making sure that we have policies that really reflect what people in California want, which is policies that are at their center really about addressing the needs of people of color and low-income folks in California."

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