

ElCerritoPatch

Angry Crowd Voices Outrage at Chevron, County

At Tuesday's noisy and often unruly town hall meeting, Chevron's apologies and promise of reparations did little to assuage public distress over Monday night's refinery fire that spewed a large plume over the community.

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August 8, 2012



Members of the Asian Pacific Environmental Network protest against Chevron in Richmond Civic Center Plaza, August, 7, 2012, Richmond, CA. Credit: [Steven Lau](#)

Hundreds of furious Richmond residents vocalized their dissatisfaction during a Tuesday night town hall meeting, where a panel of Chevron, county, and city officials attempted to respond to community concerns about Monday night's refinery fire.

Members of the public who spoke during the meeting expressed anger toward Chevron, frustration with the county's emergency alert system and concern over their families' health. Several times during the two-hour meeting, attended by more than 500 people, Chevron refinery general manager Nigel Hearne voiced regret over Monday's accident, which produced a large plume of smoke visible in much of the Bay Area.

"I take full responsibility for the incident that occurred yesterday, and I offer my sincerest apologies," he said.

Chevron called the meeting at the Richmond Memorial Auditorium in the wake of the five-hour fire Monday night that caused nearly a thousand people to go to local hospitals with respiratory complaints, prompted a shelter-in-place warning, halted BART service and drew about 80 firefighters from several agencies, including the El Cerrito Fire Department.

Although Hearne confirmed that Chevron is providing a claims process for residents to receive compensation for any medical or property expenses related to the fire, he received a

torrent of boos, hisses and shouts from the rowdy audience, which remained vocal the entire night.

Contra Costa County Supervisor John Gioia watched the meeting from the crowd, and said he was not at all surprised by the residents' display of emotion.

"As someone who lives in Richmond, I understand why people are here venting and expressing their concern," Gioia said. "The hope is to have a venue to respond to questions. I think it is hard to do that in this environment, but it's a start."

Gioia said the county hopes to address residents' remaining questions at additional meetings or through other mediums.

He added that the county and city will order an independent agency to perform a root cause analysis to determine what set off the refinery fire.

"As local government, we're going to take steps to hold the refinery accountable and to ensure this doesn't happen again," Gioia said.

Chevron has said it is cooperating with local government agencies to determine what caused the blaze.

Blaming Chevron

Hearne's apology did little to quell the anger of meeting attendees toward Chevron. Several dozen residents took the microphone during the lengthy public comment portion of the meeting, and nearly all of them criticized the oil company.

Jose Rivera, who is a part of Occupy Richmond and the Richmond Progressive Alliance, accused Chevron of having little concern for the environment or community.

"I want some accountability for one, but I also want to see the community wake up to what Chevron is really doing in Richmond—the corruption, the pollution," Rivera said. "I want people to realize Chevron is not a good corporation. They're not a good neighbor."

While some residents demanded Chevron leave Richmond, several others acknowledged that the city would only have more problems if Chevron relocates.

Hearne's attempts to reassure the audience of Chevron's commitment to the safety of its workers and the Richmond community fell largely on deaf ears, and Hearne quickly left after the meeting, protected by police officers from the more raucous members of the audience.

Chevron sets up process for claims

Tuesday afternoon before the meeting, Chevron spokesman Brent Tippen said the company has established a process for accepting claims for medical and property costs.

"We set up a claims process through Crawford and Company to compensate our neighbors for medical and property expenses incurred as a result of the incident, and we will respond to these claims as promptly as possible," he said.

Those who wish to file a claim can call 1-866-260-7881, Tippen said.

University of San Francisco sociologist Stephen Zavestoski, an expert on citizen responses to industrial health impacts who watched the Chevron plume from his El Cerrito home, said that quick offers of claims settlement can be a way for a company to inoculate itself against future liability. Often claim settlement offers include waivers in which those who file claims agree not to sue or pursue future damages, he said.

Chevron's "strategy today would be essentially to get people to sign away their right to future litigation," said Zavestoski, co-author of the book, *Contested Illnesses: Citizens, Science, and Health Social Movements*.

Health impacts a top concern

By 5 p.m. Tuesday, 949 people had reported to the emergency rooms of Doctors Medical Center and Richmond Kaiser complaining of smoke-related symptoms, said Dr. Wendel Brunner, the Director of Public Health for Contra Costa County Health Services and one of the panelists.

No one had needed to be hospitalized, he said, adding, "but just because no one was injured enough to be admitted to the hospital doesn't mean that this is okay, that this is acceptable." Many people who attended Tuesday's meeting were mainly concerned with the long-term damage that the smoke could cause to their families and their animals.

"You talk about shelter-in-place, but how long can I hold my breath?" said Reverend Kenneth Davis. "What about our dogs, our pets, our chickens, our horses? What about our children?" Panelist Jeff McKay, the Deputy Air Pollution Control Officer at Bay Area Air Quality Management District, reaffirmed the report published earlier on Tuesday that toxic pollutants in the air after the fire were well under dangerous levels.

McKay said the particulate matter released by the fire is of particular concern, and tests are still being run on it.

Randy Sawyer of Contra Costa Health Services said one possible concern regarding the particulate matter is the amount of benzene, a known carcinogen associated with fires.

Protesters in Civic Center Plaza

Two groups held protests in Richmond Civic Center Plaza before the meeting.

About two dozen members of Urban Tilth—a Richmond-based nonprofit focused on urban agriculture—made speeches and waived signs demanding Chevron be held accountable for the results of the fire.

Urban Tilth members said they are especially concerned about how the pollutants from the smoke have affected their 11 gardens in the city, the soil and the water.

The demonstration included the throwing away of many plants Urban Tilth members say have been contaminated by the smoke and are not safe to eat.

"It's all my hard work and dedication that's just being thrown away," said 21-year-old Zaira Sierra, who has been a member of Urban Tilth since March. "We need to counteract the damages they (Chevron) have done and we need to grow as a community and hold them accountable."

Across the plaza from Urban Tilth were members of the Asian Pacific Environmental Network, who said Chevron should be spending money on altering the refinery so accidents like this don't repeat.

“We have community members that live in the shadow of the refinery, who have to deal with the pollution day in and day out, so this incident is just unacceptable,” said APEN Executive Director Roger Kim. “We want this refinery to be investing in cleaner energy and better technology.”

During the town hall meeting, other residents echoed APEN’s call for Chevron to invest some of its multi-billion dollar profits into cleaner and safer energy technology.

At one point in the meeting, Urban Tilth started a chant, and repeatedly demanded to know the exact pollutants found in the smoke from the fire.

McKay said 23 pollutants had been found, but none in excess quantities. He did not elaborate on the chemical compounds, despite angry shouts and boos from Urban Tilth and other residents.

More details on origin of fire, injuries

Before the meeting, Chevron provided information about events preceding the fire and worker injuries.

At about 4:15 p.m., workers noticed a “hydrocarbon leak” in the number 4 crude unit and efforts were made to assess and stop the leak, Tippen said.

But around 6:30 p.m., the leak increased, he said. Employees were quickly evacuated from the area and the “hydrocarbon then ignited, resulting in the fire,” he said.

Tippen said three employees suffered minor injuries that were treated at the plant—a small burn on an ear, a wrist burn and smoke inhalation.

Approximately 20 response vehicles and 80 firefighters battled the blaze, which was contained at about 11:50 p.m., he said. In addition to Chevron’s own fire crew, firefighters came from the Richmond, El Cerrito, Rodeo, Hercules and Orinda-Moraga fire departments, he said.

“We thank them for their exceptional efforts,” he said.

He noted that the company is providing updates on its website, and on Facebook and Twitter.

Emergency Alert System

Several residents at the meeting said they never received an emergency alert from the county about the fire or the shelter-in-place order. Instead, they heard the news from concerned relatives or friends.

Katherine Hern, who works in the county sheriff’s office as the manager of the community warning system, was one of the panelists during Tuesday’s meeting.

During her short presentation, she said the county uses a variety of methods to try to alert residents of an emergency, including phone calls, sirens, social media and press releases to the media.

Hern stressed that residents need to make an effort to understand how they can receive alerts.

“No matter how well the system is designed or tested or operated on a daily basis, it is only as effective as what you understand as how it’s supposed to work or not work,” Hern said. This was met with some shouts and boos from audience members who said it was the county’s job to make sure everyone is alerted to an emergency.

Hern said the emergency alert system made phone calls to roughly 20,000 numbers—some landlines and some cell phones—and that it took more than three hours to do so.

Hern and Sawyer emphasized that the county would be scrutinizing the effectiveness of the system.

To sign up for cell phone emergency alerts from the county, visit the community warning system website.