

'We are Richmond.' A beleaguered community earns multicultural clout.

Richmond's jumble of smokestacks and storage tanks overlooking a port is one of the most industry-dense areas in the San Francisco Bay Area - and one of the poorest and most beleaguered. But this dynamic, multi-cultural community is transforming its political climate from a polluted company town to a vanguard in the nation's environmental justice movement. Richmond residents have reached across racial and social divides to achieve some of the nation's biggest successes for environmental equity. Just a few years ago, they persuaded a judge to halt the expansion of Chevron's massive refinery and order more research into the risks to the health of its neighbors. "People have heard about Richmond," said environmental activist Jessica Tovar. "They want to know how Richmond was able to fight the oil industry. We're making a bigger impact than we know."



SPECIAL SERIES

POLLUTION,
POVERTY,
PEOPLE OF COLOR

IN THIS SERIES:
COMMUNITIES
ACROSS THE US
FACE
ENVIRONMENTAL
INJUSTICES



Jessica Tovar, a community organizer who leads 'toxic tours' of Richmond, walks along a trail with views of the Chevron refinery.

By Cheryl Katz and Jane Kay Photos by Robert Durell Environmental Health News June 5, 2012

Part 2 of [Pollution, Poverty, People of Color](#)

RICHMOND, Calif. – “Sa Bai Dee,” begins the small, white-haired man in the lime-green T-shirt, speaking in his native dialect, Khmu. “Good evening, Madame Mayor and members of the city council,” translates the younger man in a matching green shirt, “I am Lipo Chanasack. I live here in Richmond.” Through his translator, Chanasack urges the seven members of the Richmond City Council to reduce the outsized environmental burden on the low-income, largely non-white neighborhoods beneath the city's industrial smokestacks. He speaks of being part of a diverse, ethnic

coalition that has banded together to fight for this common goal. “We are Richmond. We are inside, not outside,” Chanasack’s translator tells the panel. “We don’t need any pollution.” Then both men press their hands together in traditional Laotian nop, bow and leave the podium.

This is Richmond today: A dynamic, multi-cultural community that is transforming its political climate from a polluted company town to a vanguard in the environmental justice movement. Its jumble of smokestacks and storage tanks overlooking a port is one of the most industry-dense areas in the San Francisco Bay Area, and one of the most beleaguered. But residents have reached across racial and social divisions to achieve some of the nation’s biggest successes for environmental equity.

This is Richmond today: A multi-cultural community transforming itself from a polluted company town to a vanguard in the environmental justice movement.

The topic of [this meeting](#) is a revision of the general plan, an [official document](#) that will guide Richmond’s land-use policy for the next two decades. When the process began six years ago, the city claimed it was the first in the nation to address racial and economic inequities in residents’ environmental health in its general plan. While other cities have since come on board, and Richmond’s lofty ambitions have been toned down some over time, the plan is still one of the nation’s most broad-reaching efforts to make environmental justice a part of city policy.



A playground at a North Richmond school in Atchison Village has views of Chevron storage tanks.

Not everyone agrees with these efforts. The council chamber this evening is packed with a rainbow of races and ethnicities clad in colorful T-shirts representing an array of factions. LiUNA Builds America, proclaims the shirt of one of the 111 people signed up to address the council. “I am absolutely, totally, completely in support of environmental issues,” the man says, emphatically. “However, what I am not in support of is tunnel vision with blinders.” A shirt reading Don’t Kill Our Jobs waves in the audience. And Christopher Thornberg, an economist hired by the Richmond Chamber of Commerce, warned that some of the plan’s new proposals to reduce air emissions would not only harm the city’s main industries but would hurt neighboring shops and restaurants, too. Richmond has “an economy that is finally starting to pull out of the doldrums,” said Thornberg. “This will nip it in the bud.”

The overall plan passes, although some strict air quality measures are set aside. It is a landmark event, illustrating how much Richmond has changed after years of struggle by people who historically have borne the brunt of industry’s environmental impacts.

The victories for these bulldoggish community activists have been piling up; just a few years ago, they persuaded a judge to halt the expansion of Chevron's massive Richmond refinery and order more research into its potential effects on residents' health.

"People have heard about Richmond," said Jessica Tovar, an organizer for the environmental group Communities for a Better Environment (CBE) who has assisted the Richmond residents. "They want to know how Richmond was able to fight the oil industry. We're making a bigger impact than we know."

“When you elevate the rights of corporations...over the rights of people...then you get this pattern of unequal protection. That's why we get communities like Richmond.” -Robert Bullard, Texas Southern University

Richmond is emblematic of a movement underway across the nation. Environmental justice is a growing effort to address a dangerous divide: Minority and low-income communities tend to encounter far greater environmental risks and far less protection than more affluent, white communities. Major forces behind this are racial segregation and discrimination, income gaps and social inequality, coupled with a politically powerless and naïve populace unable to advocate for itself.

Similar efforts are taking place nationwide, such as a coalition of African-Americans and Latinos stopping a sewage treatment plant from being built in their Northern Manhattan neighborhood, and a multicultural group in Boston helping local communities fight, among other things, a diesel power plant slated to be built next to an elementary school.

Richmond's rainbow	
Black	33%
Hispanic	39.5%*
Asian	13.5%
Non-Hispanic white	17.1%
Other/more than one race	42.8%
*Hispanics can be any race	
(Source: 2010 Census)	

“These are environmental sacrifice zones that the environmental justice movement has been fighting for 30 years,” said [Robert D. Bullard](#), dean of the Barbara Jordan-Mickey Leland School of Public Affairs at Texas Southern University, who is considered the “father” of environmental justice.

Polluting poor, minority neighborhoods “is often seen as the price of doing business,” he said. “When you elevate the rights of corporations to pollute over the rights of people to have a clean environment, then you get this pattern of unequal protection. That's why we get communities like Richmond.”

In Richmond, population 103,701, one in six residents lives below the federal poverty level, and more than eight in 10 are people of color, according to 2010 U.S. Census data. In North Richmond, next to one of the nation's largest refineries, 97 percent of residents are non-white and nearly one in four live in poverty.

The plight of Richmond, within a ring of five refineries, three chemical plants, eight Superfund sites and numerous other pollution sources, has turned many local

residents of all colors into activists, and drawn the attention of sociologists, legal scholars and scientists.

Now its city hall is an example of one that is “listening to and forced to respond to environmental justice activists,” said [Jason Corburn](#), an associate professor of city and regional planning in the school of public health at UC-Berkeley. He studies environmental justice movements and was an advisor on early stages of developing the new general plan. “Organizations like APEN [Asian Pacific Environmental Network] were instrumental in the last couple of years in shifting the balance of power at the city council.”

Throughout Richmond’s past, Corburn said, “the city was very much in the pocket of Chevron.” A refinery operating in Richmond since 1901, first as Standard Oil and later as the Chevron Corporation, had long been the city’s biggest single source of [tax revenues](#) – and air pollution.

Officials often made decisions that benefited industry without taking into account the risks to residents. Despite having had an African-American majority on the city council since 1988, ethnic communities had little voice in local politics, according to Corburn and others who follow the environmental justice movement in Richmond. So in the lead-up to the 2004 election, when APEN joined with organizations of African-Americans, Latinos and others to elect new leaders, it was, in Corburn’s words, “a major win.”

Andrés Soto, co-founder of the Richmond Progressive Alliance, credits this cross-cultural cooperation with bringing about the changes in the city council, and ultimately, the new city plan. “If it was not for the creation of a multi-ethnic collaboration, none of this would have happened,” said Soto, a lifelong Richmond resident who, in his other job, plays Latin music at Bay Area venues. “It would have been filthy business as usual.”



The Richmond harbor is next to toxic waste sites.

For its part, Chevron says it has always tried hard to be a good corporate neighbor and work with local communities, pointing out that the company has been in Richmond for more than a century – longer than the city has been incorporated. It is the city’s biggest employer, with more than 2,000 workers, 7 percent of them from Richmond. Chevron paid about [\\$25 million a year](#) in city taxes and fees, about 10 percent of the city’s total revenues, according to a 2007 report. Last year, its donations to Richmond’s civic and nonprofit groups totaled \$3.4 million.

“We are always happy to talk with residents of Richmond about their concerns,” spokeswoman Melissa Ritchie wrote in an email response to questions. “What we hear from the larger community are concerns around jobs and the economy.”

Strict air quality regulations set by federal, state and regional agencies protect residents' health, she said, and the company has made significant efforts to cut its emissions. "In fact, over the past 20 years, Richmond air quality has steadily improved, and is comparable to San Francisco and better than Concord and Napa," Ritchie said.

'We can protect the health and environment of Richmond and at the same time create jobs and grow a more prosperous economy.'

One of the oldest EJ movements

Richmond's environmental justice movement stretches back more than a quarter-century, making it one of the oldest in the country. While the movement has its roots in early civil rights and labor struggles, the issue gained widespread awareness in the mid-1980s, when a United Church of Christ study reported that the vast majority of hazardous waste facilities in the nation were located in African-American neighborhoods.



Henry Clark grew up in North Richmond with views of the oil refinery.

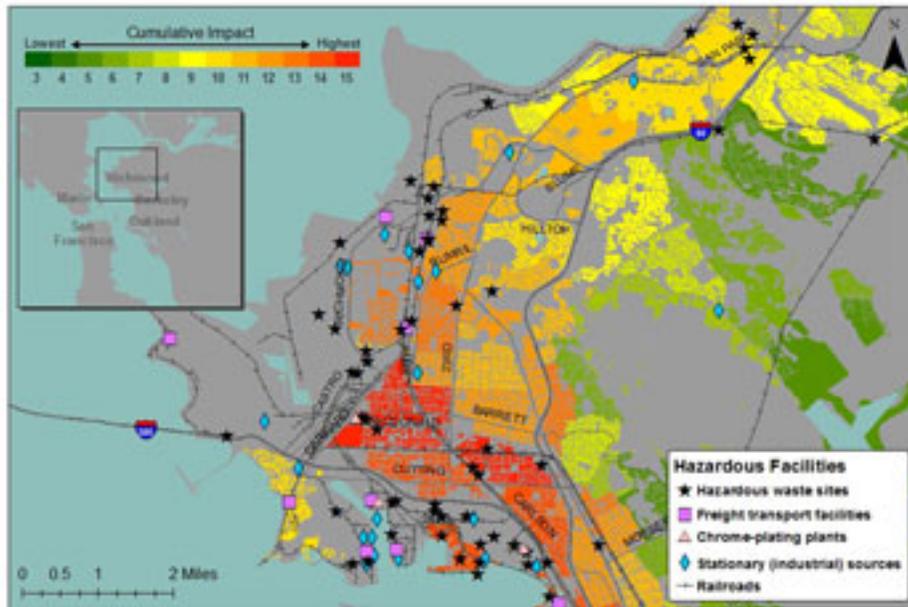
Richmond is an example of a city that is “listening to and forced to respond to environmental justice activists.” -Jason Corburn, University of California, Berkeley

It was about that time that the West County Toxics Coalition, a grassroots force of primarily African-Americans, formed in Richmond. Henry Clark, born and raised in North Richmond just a few blocks from the Chevron refinery, became the group's executive director in 1986, and still works there today. "I came up during the early '60s and the civil rights and black power movement," said Clark, a venerable figure known for his dapper wardrobe, which this day includes a white Ascot cap and a polka-dot hankie in the breast-pocket of his velvet jacket. "The saying then was to get education and come back and help your community. Always, North Richmond was what I considered home."

His home was among the most industrial and polluted communities in the nation, routinely blasted by burning gases and thick smoke from the refinery, and next to chemical plants, a commercial port frequented by huge diesel ships and a slew of shuttered factories left over from the city's World War II shipbuilding days.

One of the coalition's first battles in the late 1980s, Clark said, was to stop construction of a garbage incinerator near a North Richmond elementary school. After that, the group went on to organize a 1991 postcard campaign against Chevron's plans to expand use of a pesticide incinerator next to North Richmond. The project was eventually halted. "In terms of the campaigns, in terms of the work," he said, "that

snowballed.”



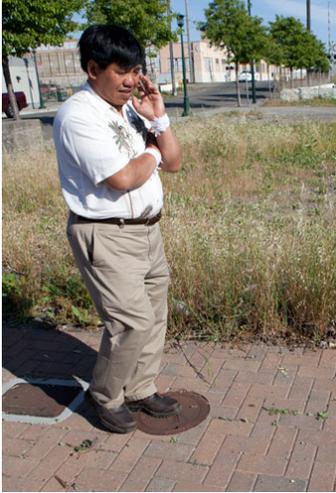
Click map to view full size.

Clark and other members of Richmond’s growing environmental movement tackled a series of local issues during the 1990s, winning reductions of toxic air emissions and discharges to San Francisco Bay and setting up a warning system for residents during refinery accidents. An agreement with General Chemical and the Chevron refinery led to a new North Richmond health clinic, and the coalition also was instrumental in enacting one of the nation’s strictest industrial safety ordinances, requiring plants to develop accident-prevention plans.

The so-called flare rule is considered one of their biggest successes. For more than 50 years, Chevron had vented toxic gases as a way to discharge waste and relieve pressure. Flames shooting out of the stacks was a dramatic – and all too frequent – sight in North and central Richmond. With it came methane, sulfur dioxide and other sulfur compounds and hydrocarbons, capable of causing respiratory problems. Knocking on doors, and organizing house meetings, community groups gathered reports of nausea, dizziness, coughing and breathing difficulties. They went on to canvass neighborhoods near refineries in Rodeo, Martinez and Benicia. After documentation of [flaring](#) incidents by CBE scientists and lawyers, and boisterous public protests and testimony, the Bay Area Air Quality Management District passed a 2005 rule restricting flaring at all five oil refineries.

"It was a spectacular success," said Greg Karras, a CBE senior scientist who worked on the rule and its enforcement. Although the flares still occur, he said, "I do know that Chevron is flaring 10 times less than before the flare rule."

Richmond’s ethnic organizations started to take shape in the 1990s, after its low housing prices attracted immigrants from a wide range of countries, as well as Latinos displaced by San Francisco’s gentrification. Over time, neighborhoods on the industrial west side changed from solidly African American to Latino, Asian – many of them refugees from war-torn Southeast Asia – and other racial and ethnic groups.



Torm Nompraseurt walks near a spot in Richmond where the home of relatives once stood. He said his relatives tore down the house, which was next to a salvage yard, after finding toxic substances.

The emerging leaders included people like Torm Nompraseurt. One of the first 3,000 refugees allowed to flee Laos in 1975, Nompraseurt had lived in Richmond for more than two decades when he became concerned that his recent-immigrant neighbors couldn't understand safety instructions given during a 1999 refinery fire. "They only have English," he said. "Our community needs to know what's going on. Other non-English speaking communities need to know... what the situation is in their own language." Founder of the Laotian Organizing Project and a state organizer for APEN, the Asian-Pacific group, he mobilized the Laotian community and helped get a multi-lingual warning system in place.

End of the "corporatocracy"

"They cannot divide us anymore. They might have money, but they don't have people like us." -Torm Nompraseurt

In the past decade, Soto, Nompraseurt, Clark and other activists came to see the Richmond city council as an obstacle to environmental equity, so they united to push for change from the inside. Their efforts helped Richmond Mayor Gayle McLaughlin become the nation's first Green-party mayor. Then, three new council members they considered sympathetic to their cause were elected in 2008, turning out two incumbents whom Soto described as "bought and sold by the corporatocracy." Chevron spent more than \$1 million to support the losing candidates in that election, according to campaign finance reports.

It was a major turning point for environmental justice, Nompraseurt said. In the past, "the city council is going to vote whatever Chevron wants, we know that."

They have great hopes that the city's new general plan will improve conditions in neighborhoods near the city's industrial heart. It aims to work with regulatory agencies to tighten emissions limits, to monitor residents' health and to hold industry financially accountable for its environmental impacts. City planner Lina Velasco said that will be accomplished through "compliance and enforcement."

Activists scored another major victory in 2009, when they sued to stop, at least temporarily, Chevron's plans to expand its operations in Richmond. The company had already received city approval to construct a new hydrogen plant and upgrade

equipment that would increase production and capacity to remove sulfur from crude oil, among other things. In the suit, won on appeal, the groups claimed that the expansion would allow the company to process heavier grades of oil, increasing emissions and endangering the health of people. The suit challenged the project's environmental impact report, claiming that it did not disclose the potential harm to residents.



The Chevron refinery can be seen from the Wildcat Creek Trail in North Richmond.

“Winning that lawsuit was one of the biggest victories in Northern California for environmental justice activists, at least in the last 10 years,” said Corburn. “The fact that you could challenge one of the biggest multinational corporations on their home turf, and get the judges to rule that they were not disclosing appropriate information on environmental impacts and exposures, and to de-certify what the city of Richmond had already approved,” he said, “was a significant victory.”

The company has reduced the project and is currently redoing the environmental impact report. Velasco said the proposal will come up for city approval next year.

According to Ritchie, the revised project will be smaller, omitting a new catalytic reformer and cogeneration energy plant. The new hydrogen plant, which will allow the company to increase fuel production, will remain, as well as equipment to more efficiently handle higher sulfur-content crude oil. Ritchie said the refinery already processes some of this oil, so the changes do not mean Chevron will use heavier crude than it did in the past. “Of course, it’s not about what goes into the refinery, but more importantly, it’s about what goes out,” she said.

“We can protect the health and environment of Richmond and at the same time create jobs and grow a more prosperous economy.” -Melissa Ritchie, Chevron refinery

Richmond’s multi-ethnic coalition is already gearing up for another battle over the proposal, Soto said.

But Nompraseurt says he is not worried now that the people have clout. “We cannot say this is only African American community issue, only Latino community issue,” he said. “All our communities, we understand that we need to work together.” Although it took a long time for the ethnic groups to overcome suspicions of each other and unite in their fight, “they cannot divide us any more,” Nompraseurt said,

“They might have money, but they don’t have people like us.”

----- For more stories in the series, see [Pollution, Poverty, People of Color Day one](#) of the series: The factory on the hill. A California community copes with 5 refineries, 3 chemical plants and scores of toxic waste sites.