Who Plans Our Cities?

Richmond Residents Fight to Shape a Healthy City

By Marcy Rein

Traditionally, residents of Richmond, California have had little voice in planning their city; the process being dominated by Chevron, real estate developers, and other corporations. But in the past six years, a community-based coalition—Richmond Equitable Development Initiative (REDI)—working with a constellation of community organizations and regional experts has successfully incorporated a solid set of community priorities into the new General Plan approved by the City Council in April 2012.

“The Plan is our vision for the next 30 years,” says Jeff Rutland of the Contra Costa Interfaith Supporting Community Organization (CCISCO). “It ties together all the things we want to see happen in our city.”

Almost every section of Richmond’s new Plan includes policies and actions that promote health, addressing everything from quality food stores and urban gardens to air quality monitoring and living-wage jobs. (See box: What REDI Won in the Richmond General Plan.) The Plan also has a standalone “Health and Wellness” section, a first in California.

To shape the Plan, REDI members had to persistently push back against bureaucratic and interest group opposition. Certain key city staff have longstanding ties to Richmond’s corporate-friendly political elite, so the people’s priorities kept getting written out of the Draft Plan until REDI mobilized. When the General Plan finally came before the Planning Commission and City Council for approval, the Chamber of Commerce and Council of Industries launched a full-throttle attack.

However, the REDI Plan prevailed, thanks to a strategy that combined education and activism where REDI members thoroughly familiarized themselves with the Plan, then educated and lobbied decision-makers—turning out in force to advocate for their priorities at every public hearing over a six-year planning and approval process.

How Inequity Developed in Richmond

With 32 miles of shoreline and sweeping views of the San Francisco Bay, Richmond is a beautiful place. It’s also a desirable place with several acres of undeveloped land, a deep-water port, and bus, rail, and freeway links to the rest of the Bay Area and beyond. But thanks to its development policies, inequity is etched deep into the landscape of Richmond, host to Chevron’s main West Coast refinery.

Richmond’s decline began as World War II ended, winding down work at the shipyards post-1945. But instead of investing in new industrial uses for the old shipyard site, in the mid ’70s, Richmond sank redevelopment money into a high-end Marina Bay condo.
complex, and rather than revive the downtown corridor next to the new BART system, it opened the Hilltop Mall in the northwest corner of the city.

The oil-refining and chemical-processing industries that remain continue to provide well-paying jobs but few of them go to Richmond residents. “The connection between residents as employees and industry was slowly but surely severed,” said Alex Schafran, a graduate student of planning who worked with REDI from 2007 to 2009. But it’s the residents, particularly those hard against the industrial corridor, who bear the brunt of the pollution from the Chevron refinery, the diesel truck traffic from the Port of Richmond, the Burlington Northern-Santa Fe railroad, and the 350 other industrial polluters that surround the city.

It’s worth noting that two-thirds of Richmond residents are people of color—and more than 16 percent fall below the official poverty line.

Educating to Build Power

REDI was formed in 2003 to reverse the trend toward inequitable development. Urban Habitat and its original core partners began with research, policy development, and advocacy. When Richmond began updating its General Plan in 2006, REDI saw an opportunity to put equitable development policies to work and reached out to base-building groups to engage in the planning process, forming a coalition whose members—Asian Pacific Environmental Network (APEN), CCISCO, Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment (ACCE), Communities for a Better Environment (CBE), and FaithWorks—represent a cross-section of Richmond today.

The campaign began in February 2007 with a six-

The results of Richmond’s inequitable development show up in the most basic statistics. In the Iron Triangle neighborhood surrounding the city’s decimated downtown, 31.5 percent of the residents live in poverty. When measured against the higher cost of living in the Bay Area, the poverty rate in Richmond is closer to 27 percent rather than the 20 percent overall for the East Bay. That’s according to the East Bay Alliance for a Sustainable Economy (EBASE), an Oakland-based research institute that provided technical assistance to the REDI campaign.

Roughly one-third of Richmond’s African American and Latino residents are poor. Even before the current economic meltdown, more than one-third of the city’s young African American men were unemployed. As of January 2012, 15.4 percent of the people in Richmond were officially unemployed, compared with 9.3 percent in Contra Costa County as a whole.

Children in Richmond are almost twice as likely to go to the hospital with asthma as children in other parts of the United States. City residents have higher rates of death from heart disease, diabetes, and stroke than people in Contra Costa County as a whole; they are also more likely to contract AIDS, give birth to underweight babies, and die from homicide.

At present, Richmond doesn’t even have a major supermarket or grocery store, pointed out Ina Mason, an ACCE activist and local resident, because they closed down the Lucky’s and Safeway.
week long Leadership Institute for the grassroots groups where an array of interactive exercises presented in English, Spanish, Mien, and Lao helped equip the community to engage with the General Plan. Forty-four people aged 13 to 80 took part in the seven-week program where they plotted their daily activities on huge wall maps of Richmond to see how planning shaped their lives; drew their visions for the future over photographs of the city’s vacant lots and boarded-up buildings; learned a lesson in basic planning lingo; and played “Richmond Jeopardy” to pull together the new concepts and language they had learned.

“I learned so much about things like zones and how they are chosen,” said ACCE’s Ina Mason. “At first it was a bit overwhelming, but then I looked forward to the sessions.” She stayed with the campaign to the end.

REDI also organized a three-part institute for elected and appointed officials later that year, attended by many city leaders involved in the planning process, including Mayor Gayle McLaughlin and five members of the City Council, the city manager, the redevelopment director, the community and economic development manager, the planning director, the principal planner, and the senior planner.

Throughout the campaign, REDI continued to educate and dialogue with decision-makers in both informal and formal settings—from offline conversations to public meetings.

**Learning to Engage in the Process... and to Wait**

The City of Richmond announced the General Plan update in early 2006, intending to complete the process by late 2007. It did not issue the first Draft Plan until July 2009.

The document addressed some of REDI’s priorities, but left many untouched. It included language supporting affordable mass transit but did not speak specifically to the needs of youth, seniors, low-income people, and others who depend on transit. It provided for air-quality monitoring but did not address the need to reroute diesel trucks away from neighborhoods.

REDI responded with a detailed public comment in writing at the Planning Commission meeting in October 2009, but those recommendations were gutted in a new Draft General Plan issued by the Planning Department in early December.

REDI members then visited individual City Council members and testified at a January 2010 Council study session on the Plan, which resulted in the recommendations being temporarily reinstated. The group repeated the lobbying and mobilizing cycle several more times before the Planning Commission produced the Final Draft General Plan in October 2011. At that point, the Chamber of Commerce and Council of Industries—anchored by Chevron, the city’s largest employer—came out in the open with their attack.

**99% vs. 1% at the Planning Commission**

At the October 2011 Planning Commission meeting, right after the city planning staff’s presentation, the head of the Richmond Chamber of Commerce kicked off the public comment period with a slick 90-second video featuring three teens (black and Latino) sitting on a hill overlooking the Bay, discussing their future. One hopes he can get a job after finishing school. Another says she’s working two jobs to help support her family because her dad was laid off when his workplace closed.

“Stay strong!” the other two encourage her before a voiceover declares: “We can work together; by not regulating business, we can keep jobs in Richmond for these young people’s future.”
To the 18 REDI speakers present, a healthy future for the young people meant business would do its part in cleaning up toxic sites and accepting cleanup as a condition of reuse, and monitoring air quality and tracking its cumulative impact over time.

REDI speakers also took issue with the Planning Department’s attempt to soften air quality monitoring language by adding “to the extent feasible.”

“How feasible is it when our children have asthma?” asked Jeff Romm of Richmond Vision.

Others who testified tied their recommendations to health in different ways, speaking in support of: safer streets with better lighting, bus shelters, and benches; local hiring and job training with a focus on those with barriers to employment; urban gardens; and incentives for stores to sell healthy foods in neighborhoods that have only liquor and convenience stores.

After a prolonged discussion, the Planning Commission voted on November 3 to amend the Final Draft Plan to include much of the strong, specific language REDI recommended. The Plan then went to the City Council for final approval.

**Why Politics Matter and Making it Work**

Richmond’s game-changing 2010 election dramatically improved REDI’s odds with the Planning Commission and City Council votes. Green Party Mayor Gayle McLaughlin got reelected and her close ally, Jovanka Beckles won a first term. Together with Councilmember Jeff Ritterman, they formed a progressive bloc that provided a solid base of support for REDI,

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**The Elephant in the City: Chevron**

Chevron’s refinery sprawls over 2,900 acres, occupying 13.4 percent of Richmond’s land. The oil giant, far and away Richmond’s largest private employer and political contributor, anchors the Chamber of Commerce and Council of Industries. The business PAC it funds, Moving Forward, pumped $1.2 million into the 2012 City Council elections alone.

“I call Richmond a ‘corporatocracy,’ meaning that it’s ruled by the corporations,” Planning Commissioner Soto said. “Whoever is in power, Chevron and the other corporations will buy them off.”

Around 10 percent of the city’s revenue comes from Chevron’s payments of fees and taxes. The company hands out more than $1 million per year in charitable donations to community groups, though it has repeatedly disputed Contra Costa County’s property tax assessments. Chevron’s Richmond Refinery emits more greenhouse gas pollution than any other facility in the state, according to the California Air Resources Board. The EPA reported the production of nearly 100,000 pounds of toxic waste at the site in 2007.

Many who grew up in Richmond carry memories of accidents and spills at the refinery and the illnesses they caused.

“I remember being a kid and playing outdoors, then seeing smoke and smelling all these nasty smells from Chevron or General Chemical, and then getting an allergic reaction,” APEN lead organizer Sandy Saeteurn said. “Growing up, this was just a regular thing.”

As recently as August 2012, a fire at Chevron’s Crude Unit #4 released toxic smoke that sent more than 15,000 people scrambling to emergency rooms. The federal Environmental Protection Agency launched a criminal investigation a month later to determine whether the company deliberately re-routed exhaust vents to bypass air quality monitoring.

Chevron announced that it would repair the damaged unit using a chromium alloy, rather than more corrosion-resistant stainless steel. The United States Chemical Safety and Hazard Investigation Board subpoenaed Chevron for more information about its choice of repair materials.

The Richmond City Council has passed two resolutions requiring Chevron to prioritize the community’s health and safety when making plans to rebuild. Some of the General Plan provisions REDI fought for—including language on air quality monitoring and local hire—strengthened the community’s effectiveness. But the Council’s will to keep holding the company accountable may weaken in the coming year. Chevron saw a significant return on its election investment with Nat Bates’ reelection and the victory of Gary Bell over the Richmond Progressive Alliance’s Eduardo Martinez.
which now needed to attract one swing vote.

The Chamber of Commerce promptly ratcheted up its attacks on the REDI proposals and in an email to the City Council and Planning Director Richard Mitchell, blamed “Oakland-based CBE” for stirring up “the Planning Commission’s attack on Richmond business.”

Representatives from business and labor, along with REDI members and allies, flooded an adoption hearing on the Plan in April 2012. Everyone, it seemed, wanted the same things but disagreed vehemently about how to get them. Predictably, an economic consultant hired by the Chamber of Commerce painted a dire picture of businesses jumping ship if the Plan imposed new rules, while union members pleaded with the Council to avoid action that would imperil jobs, especially at Chevron.

REDI speakers, meanwhile, kept bringing the focus back to health matters, rejecting the idea that the com-

What REDI Won in the Richmond General Plan

A General Plan sets a framework for a city’s long-term growth and development, which helps determine who will benefit from development.

Strong language in the General Plan lays down a foundation that community groups can build on to win new laws and policies, such as city ordinances to protect residents from displacement by new development. The Plan also guides day-to-day decisions about land use, zoning, and housing development.

The new Richmond General Plan puts community health front and center in order to address the root causes of health problems. It supports:

- Healthy food stores and urban gardens.
- Stronger requirements for affordable housing in proposed development projects through amendments to the inclusionary housing ordinance.
- Safer streets and more affordable and reliable transit.
- In addition, the Plan requires polluters to actively monitor, clean up, and reduce the toxics they put out.
- REDI members continue to pursue working to complete the General Plan campaign by ensuring the passage of an equitable Housing Element in Richmond. Richmond’s Housing Element is three years past due. REDI has been involved throughout these years in advocating for inclusive and progressive policies for the Element, as well as advocating for an open and transparent process from the city staff. A Final Draft Housing Element was approved by the Planning Commission on November 1, 2012. REDI advocated for more detailed and directive language to commit the city to stronger renter protections, amendments to the inclusionary housing ordinance, and more comprehensive code enforcement. The Planning Commission overwhelmingly supported these changes at its November 1, 2012 meeting. The next step is City Council consideration of the Element with these changes.

The Housing Element, which REDI members care about a great deal, was not included in any of the drafts of the General Plan. The City of Richmond did submit a Draft Housing Element to the California Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD) in March 2010, but the state found it incomplete and rejected it.

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Photo:
Occupy Chevron demonstration in Richmond on October 3, 2012.

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The community needs to choose between life and livelihood.

“We are Richmond… insders, not outsiders,” LOP leader Lipo Chanthanasack said through his translator. “We thoroughly support the Planning Commission. We need a good job, a healthy job, and we don’t need pollution.”

Mayor McLaughlin closed the hearing around midnight and a week later, the Council reconvened and voted 5–2 to adopt the Plan as recommended by the Planning Commission.

“The community involvement was very productive,” said Councilmember Tom Butt. “The Planning Commission was getting pressure from Chevron, the Council of Industries, and the Chamber of Commerce to do certain things. There needed to be some counterbalancing advocacy and REDI played a big part in providing that.”

With the rest of the General Plan passed, the city returned to consideration of the Housing Element, which it had put on hold. REDI advocated for more detailed and directive language to commit the city to stronger renter protections, amendments to the inclusionary housing ordinance, and more comprehensive code enforcement. The Planning Commission overwhelmingly supported these changes at its November 1, 2012 meeting.

Endnotes

Main Story
2. Interview with Sandy Saebeum, lead Richmond organizer for the Asian Pacific Environmental Network, February 8, 2012.
4. FaithWorks! and the Richmond Improvement Association (RIA) were the original core partners. RIA did not take part in the General Plan Campaign. The Greater Richmond Interfaith Project (GRIP) stepped back after two years.
5. They drew on expert technical assistance from the Center for Community Innovation at the University of California Berkeley, the East Bay Alliance for Sustainable Development, and East Bay Housing Organizations.

Sidebar 1: Pollution and Poverty
1. The Iron Triangle neighborhood in Richmond’s core takes its name from the railroad tracks that surround it on three sides: the Burlington Northern–Santa Fe tracks that parallel the Richmond Parkway, the Union Pacific–BART tracks, and the Santa Fe tracks (now abandoned and turned into the Richmond Greenway). Eighty-five percent of Triangle residents are African American and Latino, and more than 60 percent have incomes below 185 percent of the federal poverty level. Statistics from "Iron Triangle: Concentrated Poverty Neighborhood," U.S. Census 2010, compiled by United Way of the Bay Area HELP/LINK Community Information Center, accessed at <parkinfo.org/UWBA/widgets/PrintReport.php?tid=42>. Definition of 185 percent below poverty from U. S. Census.<census.gov/whœuvre/poverty/methods/definitions.html>.

Organizations in REDI are now working to translate Plan policies into laws and programs. CBE backed two City Council resolutions responding to the August 2012 Chevron fire. The Council passed both measures. (See sidebar on page 10.)

“Air quality monitoring and local hire language in the General Plan strengthened the community’s leverage in getting the City Council to act,” says Urban Habitat Land Use and Housing Coordinator Christy Lefall.

But the 2012 election has shifted the balance of power on the City Council. Nat Bates’ reelection and the victory of Gary Bell over the Richmond Progressive Alliance’s candidate Eduardo Martinez gives the pro-Chevron forces another shot at undoing important elements in the Plan.

Going forward, the Initiative's success will hinge on its ability to sustain its coalition and broaden the base for equitable development policies in Richmond.
Reimagine Planning Jobs Women & Economic Justice Transit

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