

## Refinery safety collaborative holds first Richmond forum



Ron Espinoza, District 12 director for the United Steelworkers Union, spoke to a diverse crowd at the St. Mark's gym Wednesday as part of a new collaborative on refinery safety. (Photo by: Sara Bernard)

By [Sara Bernard](#)

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The microphone sputtered in and out as community members lined up for a turn to speak at the new [Collaborative on Refinery Safety and Community Health's](#) public forum Wednesday evening. The meeting at St. Mark's Catholic Church gym was the first of many conversations the group plans to have in Richmond and across the state.

The evening's panelists included representatives from the United Steelworkers union, the Labor Occupational Health Program at UC Berkeley, and several environmental groups. Speakers stressed both the causes of the August 6 Chevron refinery fire and the regulatory changes that could prevent similar accidents from recurring.

The group has two daylong meetings scheduled with Governor Jerry Brown's task force on refinery safety this month. Members plan to incorporate community input as well as their own collective expertise to offer recommendations for how to better regulate the state's oil refineries.

"I'm listening with my ears as wide open as I can get them," Greg Karras, a senior scientist at Communities for a Better Environment, told a buzzing crowd.

As images and statistics concerning the August 6 fire flashed on the gym's back wall – including a close-up shot of the corroded pipe that the U.S. Chemical Safety Board confirmed caused the accident [in a report issued February 13](#) – panelists noted specific safety oversights, such as the two thousand corroded pipes in the Richmond refinery that had been inadequately patched "like a bicycle tire," Karras said.

Few of the concerns about Chevron's negligence addressed were new concerns. But the call to action – specifically legal action – was acute.

"The fact that the governor is talking to us, what does that say?" said Ron Espinoza, District 12 director for the United Steelworkers Union. "Possible legislation. That's how you beat the Chevrons and the Shells, by legislation: getting things done on the local, state, and federal level that they have to comply to."

Julie Waters, a representative from Assemblymember Nancy Skinner's office, announced AB 1165, one of [two bills proposed by Democratic legislators](#) last week in direct response to the Chevron refinery fire. Both bills align with the collaborative's priorities, but were developed independently.

AB 1165, Waters said, would require an employer cited by Cal/OSHA for "serious" or "willful" violations to abide by the citation even in the case of an appeal – a process that can take years.

"This is such an energized crowd," she said, noting that, despite the time passed since the August fire, "it seems to be fresh on everyone's mind. I'd like to keep it that way."

Other suggestions offered Wednesday included strengthening the loopholes in the city and county's [Industrial Safety Ordinance](#) and requiring refinery managers who override workers' safety concerns to make their reasoning public information.

"I've been investigating chemical accidents for 14 years," said Don Holmstrom, the western regional director for the Chemical Safety Board. "In Richmond, what I've seen is a proactive response really focused on effective solutions. The movement and momentum here is very positive."

That Richmond is proactive, Holmstrom added, makes his job easier – and more effective. "It's really refreshing," he said. The Chemical Safety Board's "recommendations are the engine that drives change, but we need support beyond our own agency," he added. "We need support in community, industry, and labor to make these changes."

The USW's Ron Espinoza also praised the energy and momentum of the new collaborative – and the Richmond community. “The Richmond area is well-educated,” he said. “The refineries are nervous about us.”