

Richmond's Battle with Chevron's Oil Refinery Project Comes to a Head

By [Jean Tepperman](#)

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The battle over a project proposed by the Richmond Chevron oil refinery is coming down to the wire. Next week, on July 29, the Richmond City Council will vote on the project — and on whether to approve the sweeping new health and safety requirements the city's Planning Commission wants to add.

At a public hearing of the city council July 22, Chevron reversed an earlier position and endorsed an alternative, "scaled-down" version of the project that would require the refinery not to increase greenhouse-gas emissions and to limit the processing of high-sulfur fuel, which poses health and safety risks. The refinery also offered to put \$6 million a year for ten years into a community-run Clean Energy and Jobs program.



The refinery's general manager, Kory Judd, appealed to the council to reject the rest of the health, safety, and climate-justice requirements adopted by the city's Planning Commission earlier this month. The project's environmental standards, he said, "far exceed what's required," and the project as a whole is "an alignment between what's good

for our business, our community, and our workers."

The Planning Commission voted earlier this month to approve the Chevron project, which will build a larger and more efficient hydrogen-production unit to replace the current one and allow for the processing of higher-sulfur crude oil. But the commission attached some serious strings.

Among these were the three main recommendations of the nonprofit **Communities for a Better Environment**. One is the requirement that Chevron replace all its old carbon steel pipes, which are subject to corrosion that leads to leaks, fires, and explosions like the one that sent

15,000 people to the hospital in August 2012. Chevron's plan is to replace these old pipes only in one area of the refinery. The commission also voted to require Chevron to reduce air pollution to the levels required by current permits before beginning the project. And the commission wants to require Chevron to contribute more — \$8 million every year from 2015 to 2050 — to a community-run Clean Energy and Jobs program.

In addition, the commission voted to require a number of other health and safety measures, including a program for reducing “toxic air contaminants,” limits on production in one processing unit (the “fluid catalytic cracker”), reduction in pollution from ships and tugboats that serve the refinery, domes over all thirty storage tanks to prevent pollution from escaping, and more.

Mayoral candidate Mike Parker of the Richmond Progressive Alliance acknowledged that, “Chevron has responded to community pressure, but [its concessions are] only a first step.” He urged the council to adopt the Planning Commission recommendations and said even with Chevron's concessions, “What is proposed here is a toxic shell game.”

“Chevron's business doesn't require this kind of pollution,” Parker added. “It just refuses to spend the money [to prevent it].”

Without the Planning Commission's requirements, said Andres Soto of Communities for a Better Environment (CBE), the alternative plan Chevron has accepted “has no teeth” and would not prevent the project from increasing health-harming pollution and the risks of fires and explosions.

City Attorney Jennifer Hernandez recommended that the council follow Chevron's lead in adopting the scaled-down alternative but rejected the other Planning Commission proposals. Some of these, she said, are not connected closely enough with Chevron's original plan so can't be part of the environmental requirements for the project.

But Greg Karras, senior scientist for CBE, argued that the city should require Chevron to make the refinery as safe as possible. It's important to take advantage of a major refinery overhaul, he said, to make essential health and safety improvements, such as replacing dangerous old equipment and increasing measures to limit air pollution. Otherwise the community could end up waiting decades for these measures, until the next overhaul.

Dozens of Chevron workers spoke in favor of Chevron's proposal, pointing to the “huge amount of resources” Chevron is devoting to the project and the refinery's “meticulous safety

program.” They charged community groups with “greed” in wanting Chevron to spend even more on safety and clean energy.

Also supporting Chevron’s proposal were speakers from the Contra Costa Democratic Central Committee, the local NAACP, and, surprisingly, the West County Toxics Coalition, which has long battled the refinery over pollution issues. In addition, Jack Broadbent, executive director of the Bay Area Air Quality Management District, praised the city’s environmental review of the project and said it would result in “no net increase of criteria contaminants,” a term referring to certain forms of air pollution.

Planning Commissioner Marilyn Langlois called on the city council to imagine Chevron spending money on “hiring people into good union jobs to make the refinery cleaner and safer,” rather than slick public relations campaigns, to imagine the Air District “enforcing its original 1995 limit on all types of particulate matter emissions from the [fluid catalytic cracker],” and to imagine the city council itself “requir[ing] Chevron to undertake reasonable safety and emissions reduction measures as part of this major construction project. ... Imagine it and do it,” she concluded. “Support the Planning Commission resolution.”

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