

A New Richmond Neighborhood?

Richmond has launched a plan to annex North Richmond into the city. But not everyone is excited about it.

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- County Supervisor John Gioia is sanguine about annexation.

North Richmond's Rancho Market was once adorned with the names of people killed in front of it. On a sunny Thursday in October, the Market Street store — the only one in the community that doesn't sell alcohol — was being prepped for a community-inspired makeover. On Saturday, a volunteer crew would be re-painting and refreshing the storefront.

Some longtime local activists, such as Henry Clark, see projects like these as evidence that unincorporated North Richmond is making progress on its own. But others, both within and outside the area, believe the time has finally come for the tiny district to be annexed to the city of Richmond.

Richmond Mayor Tom Butt, Contra Costa County Supervisor John Gioia, and some members of the North Richmond Municipal Advisory Council see annexation as a real chance for a brighter future for a place long tarnished by a history of racism and environmental injustice.

Located north of Richmond's Iron Triangle neighborhood, the 900-acre enclave has a population of approximately 3,700. North Richmond's story in the 1940s, like that of Richmond, was dominated by the influx of workers seeking employment in the booming war defense-building industry. But the many African Americans who moved to the Richmond area from the Midwest and the South found Jim Crow when they arrived.

In 1941, the Richmond Housing Authority built low-cost housing — but only for white defense workers. African Americans were regulated to unincorporated areas, particularly North Richmond, already home to the huge Standard Oil refinery, chemical companies, and railyards — and their accompanying toxic spews.

In a letter to Richmond's mayor and city council supporting annexation, 96-year-old local legend Betty Reid Soskin wrote, "Annexation for North Richmond will do much to remove invisible walls created by decades of neglect and need ...

"North Richmond's status as a segregated enclave has persisted to this day, a tiny community that lies — encircled by the city — less than 10 minutes north of Richmond's Civic Center Plaza and continues to be perceived in the light of the racial separation of an outdated social system."

Past attempts at annexation, dating back decades, were thwarted primarily by large plant nurseries, according to Jim McMillan, who served as a Richmond city councilmember from 1983 to 1995. "I proposed annexation of North Richmond," McMillan said. "We had redevelopment money at the time, and I wanted to use it to improve the area's infrastructure — drainage, lighting, and streets. Also, the whole area would be patrolled by Richmond police, who could respond faster and knew the area better than the sheriff's office. But the growers did a propaganda job about additional utility taxes, and I didn't get the support I needed."

But now, the big growers are gone, and North Richmond's demographics have changed substantially. What was once an almost entirely African-American neighborhood is now more than 50 percent Latino and nearly 12 percent Asian American, according to the 2010 census.

On Oct. 24, the Richmond City Council voted 5-2 to move forward with submitting an application to the Contra Costa County Local Agency Formation Commission to annex North Richmond and make it a district within the city. The process takes at least six months. The city plans to mail a nonbinding advisory ballot to North Richmond residents. The mailing, said Gioia, will go not only to registered voters, but, by potentially using utility bills and outreach through schools, to as many residents as possible.

LAFCO will hold a public hearing to consider the annexation application and may approve, modify, or deny the application. If LAFCO approves the annexation, and then there are any objections to the annexation, there will be a second hearing called a "protest hearing."

If fewer than 25 percent of landowners who also own 25 percent of the assessed value of land in North Richmond or fewer than 25 percent of North Richmond voters file protests, then LAFCO will confirm the annexation.

"Essentially, under the LAFCO process, under state law, if the 25-percent protest threshold is reached," Gioia explained in an email, "then a binding public vote of all registered voters occurs. If the 50-percent protest threshold is reached, then the annexation process terminates."

Annexation positives for North Richmond would include receiving city of Richmond police, fire, public works, and planning services. North Richmond would also be under Richmond's rent control law.

Butt said it's about time that North Richmond became part of the city. "Islands of unincorporated land within larger cities don't make sense," the mayor said. "They are inefficient to govern and don't give those residents the opportunity to take part in community political activities."

For North Richmond residents, annexation also will mean higher property, sales, and utility taxes. According to a fiscal analysis jointly funded by the city and county, annexation would generate \$2.8 million annually in revenue for Richmond, but the additional services provided would cost the city \$4.9 million.

"The basic issue is, 'What could be the long-term benefit?'" said Gioia, referring to North Richmond residents.

Clark, who has been a member of North Richmond's MAC for 20 years, is adamant in his opposition to annexation. He calls it a "land grab" by the city and argues that it will gentrify North Richmond. "We are doing fine under our own leadership," he said, adding that the area, with the help of the MAC, has made significant improvements over the years.

In a recent MAC vote on annexation, three members voted "no," two abstained, one voted "yes," and an absent member expressed support for annexation. Some believe the area's older leadership no longer represents North Richmond's demographics and is reluctant to let go of power. The MAC would dissolve if the area is annexed.

MAC member Aaron Morgan, who has lived in North Richmond all of his life, supports annexation. "The city has more resources, and we would have more access to basic services," Morgan noted. "If we have representation on the city council, we can push for more progress and improvements."

LaSaunda Tate, who moved to North Richmond in 2013, said she accepted a position on the MAC because she believed "there needed to be a voice for annexation. I found my neighbors did not understand they were living in an unincorporated area."

Like Morgan, she thinks the additional services and recognition on the Richmond City Council will improve the quality of life in North Richmond. "Why is this area still the way it is?" she asked. "We need to be one Richmond."

But for some North Richmond residents, questions remain about what will happen to the area's open spaces and whether adequate protections will be established to protect the low-income residents from being displaced. A large majority of North Richmond residents are

renters, meaning they could be vulnerable to property owners selling houses for profit, if the area were to gentrify after annexation brings better city services.

The Richmond Progressive Alliance called the annexation effort "a victory" in its Oct. 22 "The Activist" blog, writing, "The RPA commends the City Council and Supervisor Gioia for putting their heads together and coming up with a great plan." Nevertheless, members remain internally divided on the issue. The two council members voting against beginning the annexation process, Eduardo Martinez and Jovanka Beckles, are both RPA members.

And Mayor Butt isn't optimistic, citing, "not solid support from the RPA, although I am glad the process is moving forward."

Supervisor Gioia is more sanguine, responding, "Yes, I do," when asked if he believes annexation may actually happen. □