

NEWS FIX

Richmond Launches Review of Metal Yard That Went Up in Flames



A plume of smoke rises from Sims Metal Management in Richmond. (*Bay Area Air Quality Management District*)

By Ted Goldberg FEBRUARY 5, 2018

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Richmond city officials have begun to scrutinize the Sims Metal Management facility, [where a smoky fire](#) forced thousands of residents to stay indoors last week.

The city's Planning and Building Department will review whether Sims is complying with rules governing its work near the Port of Richmond, according to Richard Mitchell, the department's director.

"Staff is in the process of assembling information related to the recycling facility to determine if the operation is in compliance with the original conditions of approval," Mitchell said in an email Monday.

The planning department's review of Sims' conditional use permit was prompted by a request from Richmond Mayor Tom Butt

"Sims has a sordid history," Butt said, referring to the company's Redwood City facility burned by fires several years ago. "I want to reopen all of this and look into it."

The company has apologized for the fire and pledged to consider making safety changes at its Richmond location, which reopened on Thursday.

"We will look at any improvements to reduce the risk of fires at this facility, including a focus on stockpile size, improving fire breaks, and the use of technology to monitor stockpiles," said Sims spokeswoman Jill Rodby.

"We will continue to be a valuable member of the community, and we will maintain our rigorous standards," Rodby said.

The fire raises questions about how Richmond should regulate land used by industry so close to residential neighborhoods, said Contra Costa County Supervisor John Gioia, who has been involved in the county's oversight of Richmond's Chevron refinery.

Sims' South Fourth Street facility is near several locations that were under the county's shelter-in-place orders.

"We want all operators at the port to be acting responsibly, but is this the right use to have at that location?" Gioia asked.

Word of the Richmond Planning Department's review comes several days after Contra Costa County health officials revealed that [air sample](#) taken during the fire, which took place for at least 11 hours between Tuesday night and Wednesday morning, showed high levels of the carcinogen benzene near the blaze.

Long-term exposure to benzene can cause cancer. But county health officials emphasized that the health impacts of short-term exposure that were detected Tuesday night are not known.

The data came from the Bay Area Air Quality Management District, which is [investigating](#) whether the smoke violated any local air rules.

The last time the facility violated hazardous materials regulations was in October 2012, according to Contra Costa County inspection reports obtained by KQED.

They included hazardous waste material containers that were mislabeled and not always closed, an undercharged fire extinguisher and bins blocking the facility's aisles. The four violations discovered in that inspection were all corrected.

The county's hazardous materials program found no violations during a subsequent inspection in late 2014. The agency plans to conduct a new inspection of Sims in the next month or so, according to Randy Sawyer, Contra Costa's chief environmental health and hazardous materials officer.

The last fire inspection of the facility came in 2015, and it found no violations, according to Fire Chief Adrian Sheppard. Richmond fire investigators have yet to reveal a cause of the blaze.

Sims, in the meantime, is inviting members of the public to a town hall meeting Wednesday night to discuss the fire and the facility.

That meeting is scheduled to take place at Nevin Community Center between 6 p.m. and 8 p.m.