

## Air Quality District hosts informative session on refinery fire

By [Wendi Jonassen](#)

A dozen Richmond residents, most donning shirts that read ‘Clean Air for All,’ rode a bus to the Bay Area Air Quality Management District office this morning to hear from the various agencies investigating the Aug. 6 Chevron refinery fire.

Spectators filled the chairs and lined the wall of the quiet, wood-paneled room as each organization — including representatives from BAAQMD, the Environmental Protection Agency, Contra Costa Health Services, the U.S. Chemical Safety Board, and California Air Resources Board — tried to define its role in the emergency refinery incident.

The agencies also acknowledged shortcomings, especially lack of communication, both with residents and within the various agencies, and difficulties in monitoring air pollutants.

“Clearly we are going to need to do a better job of communicating with the public,” said Eric Stephenson, BAAQMD’s director of technical services. “We were just trying to communicate with the public what we knew at the time, and it clearly fell short.”

Randall Sawyer, a hazardous materials programs director with Contra Costa Health Services, laid out each time they sounded an alarm on Aug. 6—eight times in a five hour time period—along with the agency’s protocol to warn the public.

In an emergency on that scale, CCHS directly calls residents, posts updates on Facebook and Twitter, and broadcasts emergency warnings on local television stations. Still, it took more than three hours to call over 18,000 homes, Sawyer said, and he said that CCHS should have been quicker. He says they are working on communicating emergency situations better, more quickly, and more valuably.

After the presentations, Iron Triangle resident Guadalupe Corral said through a translator that none of the announcements and warnings in Richmond were made in Spanish.

Each agency highlighted the inherent technological pitfalls of monitoring.

The network of eight Bay Area air monitors — three in the Richmond area — that the BAAQMD manages costs about \$4.2 million a year in human resources to maintain, said Jack Broadbent, the executive director of the BAAQMD.

“Frankly any additional monitoring that we would require as a result of our rule-making, we would require industry to pick up that cost,” County Supervisor John Gioia said. “I don’t want the public to believe or get the impression that the cost stands in the way of implementing the best possible monitoring.”

The BAAQMD also addressed the challenges of technology in monitoring. While measuring a soup of different chemicals, like those that may come from a fire, Stephenson said that the BAAQMD may need to abandon specific chemical tests, and focus on the measuring the general mix of all hydrocarbons—the mix of chemicals emitted during a burn.

Location of the monitoring equipment is also critical, Stephenson said, with chemicals that can stay dense in certain areas, like particulates, small pieces of liquid or solid that stays suspended in the air. The agency is looking into the viability of mobile monitoring sites, but some of the technological issues involve weight, battery life, and the human resources necessary to keep those running.

“Chevron sent 15,000 of us to hospitals last month and this occurred when local air monitoring didn’t detect significant pollution,” said Communities for a Better environment scientist Greg Karras, while displaying an image of a young girl wearing an oxygen mask. “This is in important point. We registered an impact in our lungs.”

Karras, along with residents, board members, and the agencies, emphasized the need to thoroughly investigate the primary cause of the incident.

Karras said there were multiple incidents of rusty and eroded pipes in Chevron’s history, starting in 2007, when he said Chevron began importing more crude oil from the Persian Gulf than the Northern Slope of Alaska — introducing more sulfur into Chevron’s piping system and causing erosion.

The investigations are being conducted by multiple organizations and may take up to a six months or a year for results, said Nigel Hearne, the general manager of the Chevron refinery

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