

County seeks tighter safety measures in wake of new findings at Richmond Chevron plant



Smoke lingered above Richmond after a Chevron refinery fire on Aug. 6th. photo by: Tawanda Kanhema

By [Tawanda Kanhema](#) Posted September 24, 2012 3:00 pm

As Richmond Fire Department and Chevron firefighters complete joint search-and-rescue training operations at the Chevron refinery this week — a sign of cooperation between the two agencies at a time when residents and regulators are demanding answers about refinery safety — Contra Costa County is taking steps to tighten its industrial safety standards.

The county's Board of Supervisors last week appointed Supervisor John Gioia and District 5 Supervisor Federal D. Glover to consider amendments to its Industrial Safety Ordinance and review the county's Community Warning System, which failed to function properly after the Aug. 6 fire at Chevron's Richmond refinery.

Gioia said Contra Costa board members had begun acting on the findings of the Chemical Safety Board, which reported that inspectors at the refinery had failed to inspect the pipe behind the leak that caused the fire and spewed toxic emissions into residential suburbs. At least 21,000 Richmond residents have filed compensation claims against Chevron since the fire.

"One of the things we are looking at is the development of performance safety measures," Gioia said. "We will review the Industrial Safety Ordinance but we would like to wait until the Chemical Safety Board has completed its investigations and comes with recommendations."

The Community Warning System, designed to make robocalls and alert residents in the event of an accident, is managed by the Sheriff's Office and funded by industry. Gioia said the county was considering an upgrade to the telephone system, which only made automated calls to some residents four hours after the fire.

Gioia said the county would be looking for new vendors to replace the telephone alert system.

"We believe that the telephone alert system didn't perform as it should," Gioia said. "We will be looking for new vendors, and we would appreciate if the CSB not only made recommendations about how to improve Chevron's policy but also on strengthening the Industrial Safety Ordinance – we would look at that very favorably."

Contra Costa County adopted its Industrial Safety Ordinance in 1999 and amended it in 2006. The Richmond City Council, which adopted the county's ISO in 1999, had not adopted the 2006 amendments until last week.

Richmond Fire Chief Michael Banks said the amendments would improve the city and county fire departments' ability to collaborate and work more comprehensively.

The Bay Area Air Quality Management District and the Chemical Safety Board are expected to give an update on their investigations into the causes and environmental impact of the fire at a public meeting hosted by the Contra Costa Health Services Department at the Richmond Memorial Auditorium September 24.

Chevron spokesperson Derek Jansen said of the 21, 000 claims filed so far, most have been for out-of-pocket medical expenses, with a few claims relating to property damage and business losses.

Jansen said Chevron was installing new air monitors in North Richmond, Atchison Village and Point Richmond in response to community requests.

"Data collected by the Bay Area Air Quality Management District shows that Richmond air quality is among the best in the Bay Area and is similar to San Francisco and better than Concord and Napa," Jansen said. "By investing in modern technology and running more efficiently, the Richmond Refinery has reduced air pollution by 65 percent since the 1970s."

The Bay Area Air Quality Management District shows the Richmond/San Pablo area as having lower monthly and annual levels of ozone gases than Concord and other Bay Area cities. However, BAAQMD air quality filters detected the presence of acrolein, a chemical that causes runny noses and eye irritation in air samples collected from Richmond a few days after the August 6 fire.