

# Richmond to commission study on annexing North Richmond

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POSTED: 03/30/2016 02:24:03 PM PDT | UPDATED: 4 MONTHS AGO

RICHMOND -- The city is taking an initial step on the long-discussed idea of annexing unincorporated North Richmond by authorizing a study on the merits of bringing what local leaders sometimes call the "hole in the doughnut" officially within its boundaries.

The idea has been a pet project of Mayor Tom Butt since he was elected to the City Council 21 years ago, and he says the city and the county have finally agreed to look into it as a real possibility.

"North Richmond is totally surrounded by the city of Richmond," Butt said. "So the short story is that, if we do this, I think that people who live there and people who have businesses there are going to get better public services."

The unincorporated neighborhood of 1.5 square miles is surrounded by Richmond on three sides and San Pablo on the fourth.

Last week, the city collected final bids on a study that would be the first of its kind to examine the financial and social benefits of making North Richmond and its 3,500 residents part of the city.

The cost of the study, estimated at \$40,000 to \$80,000, will be paid for by both the county and the city.

Contra Costa Supervisor John Gioia, whose district includes North Richmond, believes annexation could be good for the county, the city and residents of the largely low-income community.

"From a general principal, you know you get more effective delivery of municipal services when you don't have the isolated pockets of unincorporated areas," he said. "But ultimately, it's important to study this, look at this issue from a financial and service point of view, and have the residents express their preferences."

Butt noted that annexation would bring North Richmond under the jurisdiction of the city's police and fire departments, which might improve response times for residents. Public safety services are now provided by the county.

A 2014 story in this newspaper revealed that few homicides are solved in North Richmond, which is policed by the county Sheriff's Office rather than the Richmond Police Department.

Don Gilmore, chairman of the North Richmond Municipal Advisory Committee, said the panel isn't taking a stance on annexation just yet, but does feel it is time to do a study and determine how it could affect residents.

"The question is, what are the benefits that people are going to get from the city taking it over?" he said. "What's tangible that we'll be able to see that we don't have now? What does that mean to the overall improvement of the unincorporated North Richmond?"

Although some residents have voiced support and hope annexation will lead to better police and fire services, others are wary that it may not change anything, he said.

Richmond has its own issues with crime and street maintenance and "some people may feel they can't see the benefit" without tangible assurance that services in the community will be any better, Gilmore noted.

He added that the advisory committee is eager to see the report to help it decide whether North Richmond should incorporate with Richmond, incorporate as its own jurisdiction, or become part of neighboring San Pablo.

The last major attempt at annexation in Contra Costa was in 2007, when Pittsburg proposed annexing the community of Bay Point. However, both Pittsburg and Bay Point residents were split over the decision, and ultimately the proposal was dropped. Lou Ann Texeira, executive officer of Contra Costa's Local Agency Formation Commission said public education is important.

"It's really doing public outreach, because people don't know what annexation means, and people think, 'My taxes are going to go up,' but that's not always the case."

The city will be selecting a company to conduct the study within the next few weeks, with results of the report likely ready in early 2017.

From there, it will have to pass through the Local Agency Formation Commission.

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