

# North Richmond: Car yard that caught fire received multiple violations, records show

Incident has prompted local politician to call for business to be shuttered



Firefighters work to contain a large fire that broke out at the Deal Auto Wrecking yard in Richmond, Calif., Dec. 16. The yard has received multiple violations over the years. (Laura A. Oda/Bay Area News Group)

By **KARINA IOFFEE** | [kioffee@bayareanewsgroup.com](mailto:kioffee@bayareanewsgroup.com)

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**NORTH RICHMOND** — The automobile demolition yard that caught fire last week, sending a large plume of black smoke into the sky that could be seen for miles and forcing neighbors, including a nearby school, to shelter in place for hours, has been cited for numerous violations in recent years, county officials said.

County inspectors visiting Deal Auto Wrecking last spring, following a complaint, found numerous problems, including hazardous materials that were not labeled, toxic materials that were not properly reported to the state and employees who had not received training on emergency situations, despite a requirement to do so each year, said Randy Sawyer, chief environmental health and hazardous materials officer for Contra Costa County Health Services.

Other violations included cars that were stacked higher than the maximum 10 feet that is allowed and were located too close together, likely allowing the fire to spread.

The fire has prompted county Supervisor John Gioia, who represents the unincorporated area, to call for Deal Auto Wrecking and a nearby metal salvage yard to be shuttered, saying they should not be located so close to homes.

“I’ve had an eye on that area for a few years,” Gioia said Thursday. “North Richmond is changing, and the community would be better served by that business being closed and replaced by another that is more appropriate.”

Gioia said he planned to meet with county officials to review violations at both facilities and figure out more compatible uses for the unincorporated area.

An estimated 200 cars were destroyed during the Dec. 16 fire, an incident that made some locals recall the 2012 explosion and fire at the Chevron refinery and the danger that comes from living near industry. The cause of the fire has not been released and may never be known because the fire was so destructive, obliterating even the small clues that can give investigators answers, said Robert Marshall, a spokesman for the Contra Costa Fire District. The agency is one of three that together sent more than 20 crews to fight the flames that morning.

“The damage was extensive,” Marshall said. “It may have been a short in a battery, but the batteries melted, as did the engines on the cars.”

Windy conditions that day literally fanned the flames, carrying smoke across Richmond Parkway into a subdivision where residents were hunkering down. The fire was initially reported at 7:15 a.m. and under control around 10 a.m. The presence of motor oil and gasoline in the yard also contributed to the conflagration, Marshall said.

The business is owned by Chen Long Inc. and lists Jian Song as the caretaker. A manager at the yard, who declined to give his name, said the business sends scrap metal to China and other countries in Asia. Song could not be reached for comment.