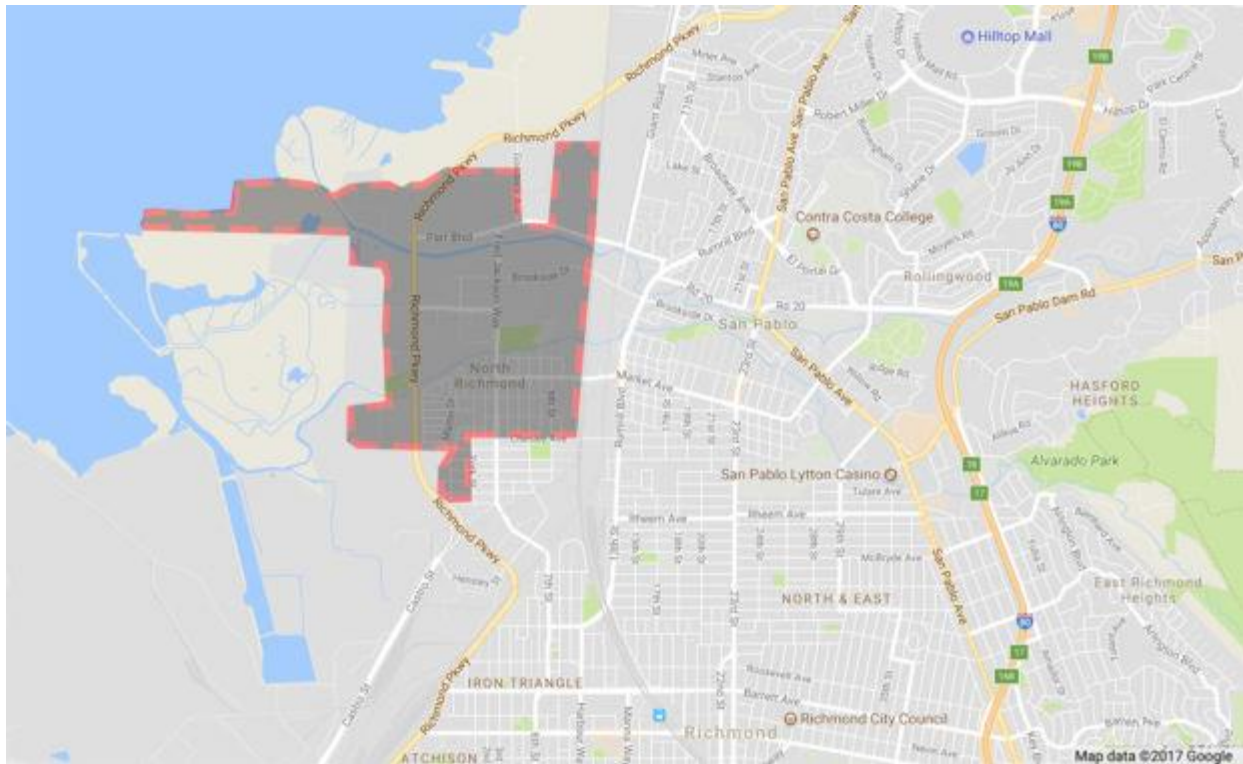


Should city incorporate North Richmond? Residents divided on eve of official decision.



The 3,700 residents of North Richmond (highlighted) could join the city of Richmond at large. Image generated by Google Maps.

By [Josh Slowiczek](#) Posted September 24, 2017 10:14 pm

Public opinion is divided. Officials are mostly tight-lipped. And after more than 50 years, Tuesday night could bring political isolation to a close for North Richmond: City council is scheduled to decide on whether to incorporate the community into Richmond at-large.

Mayor Tom Butt said annexing North Richmond is not an easy decision. But he is inclined to support doing so, and has advocated for incorporation since his election. He thinks Richmond could provide better services than the county, but says “that’s not a criticism of the county; it’s just the way things are set up.”

There are strong voices coming from both sides of the debate. Public safety, gentrification and higher taxes are just a few of the issues that associated with this decision. Yet after four community meetings this summer, there remains very little clarity how the vote will play out tomorrow night.

In fact, Butt was the only Richmond official to respond to requests to discuss the issue; other councilmembers, the Richmond Progressive Alliance and law-enforcement agencies did not respond.

Currently, North Richmond is an unincorporated, 1.5 square-mile area surrounded by the city of Richmond but governed by the Contra Costa board of supervisors. For the roughly 3,700 residents who live within this boundary, basic services such as policing, public works and planning are provided by the county.

If North Richmond were to be annexed, fulfilling those services and more would become the city's responsibility. A draft of the financial impact report, released in July, indicated that annexation would cost the city between \$2 and \$2.3 million annually, after factoring in the revenue that it would receive from a slight increase in taxes and fees.

The bump in sales tax, and utility and business-license fees has become a point of contention for some, but others say it is a step in the right direction.

Some say outreach about the nuts and bolts of annexation improved during this latest attempt at incorporation. "For probably the first time in history, we are much more informed about what it will cost and what the challenges may be," said LaSaunda Tate, vice chairperson of the North Richmond Municipal Advisory Committee (NRMAC). "We are much more informed about what it will take."

Tate, a North Richmond resident and homeowner since 2013, said the area's unincorporated status has had negative impacts on both public safety and also health, which are compounded by a lack of political representation at the local level.

"When you are isolated from the larger community—when you don't have political representation and the same municipalities as your bordering city—it's easy for things to fall through the cracks," Tate said.

A memo released in July by county Supervisor John Gioia's office echoed Tate's stance. It suggested that annexation has the potential to improve public safety through the "elimination of a longstanding political line that divides police jurisdictions."

The Contra Costa County Sheriff's Office provides most services for the area, but splits a single police beat between North Richmond and East Richmond Heights, roughly four miles away. This poses a logistical challenge, according to Gioia.

The role of the sheriff's office in North Richmond came under fire in 2014 when The Mercury News reported that, over the course of four years, charges were only filed in five of the 19 killings that occurred in the area. Department policy, cut backs and geographic separation were cited as driving reasons for the lack of follow-up.

If North Richmond were to be annexed, the Richmond Police Department (RPD) would take over jurisdiction, which would require the presence of additional patrol officers and a new captain. The sheriff's office declined to discuss the possible annexation, and RPD's public information officer was unavailable.

"I do believe there are some advantages to their [North Richmond's] annexation into Richmond, but I also respect that there is a higher tax burden," Gioia said. "Ultimately, the residents must weigh in about whether that extra tax is worth it."

For some, it's not.

Henry Clark, longtime NRMAC member, said he knows many residents against annexation. He cited the increased taxes as a reason.

If annexed, residents would see the sales tax raised by 1 percent, and utility users would see a fee increase between 5 and 10 percent.

There would also be additional fee increases for business licenses and property taxes.

However, the renters of North Richmond—approximately 73 percent of residents—would benefit from the city's Rent Control Ordinance, which includes eviction protections and an annual 3 percent cap on rent increases.

Clark is not sold on annexation, though. He said Richmond has never shown any interest in providing services to North Richmond, and he argued there is no need for an additional police presence with the joint efforts of the sheriff's office, RPD and the California Highway Patrol.

"This idea of providing services is just a flat out lie," Clark said. "It's gentrification and a land grab. Bottom line, that's what it comes down to."

Fellow NRMAC member Tate said she thinks Clark raises valid concerns, but argued the realities of the Bay Area prove that gentrification will occur whether or not North Richmond is annexed.

"I think that these are two isolated issues," she said. "Helping to improve the livelihoods of those that live here by having annexation does not create gentrification."

This difference in perspectives among NRMAC members was reflected during a committee vote earlier this month: Three members were against annexation, two abstained, and one, Aaron Morgan, voted in favor. With four votes needed to pass a motion, no recommendation was provided.

Now, the decision rests with Richmond City Council. If officials decide to continue the process, annexation will be initiated with the Local Agency Formation Commission, which can approve, edit or deny.

Approval will result in a hearing, where residents can share their views, and if more than 50 percent of commenters protest, the annexation process will be terminated.

No one seems to know whether Tuesday's city council decision will be the last word in a long history of attempts to incorporate. Tate urged everyone to study the issue.

"There is a reason why unincorporated areas in our country, that are in low-income communities, are not thriving," she said.

Clarification: This story originally reported that LaSaunda Tate voted in favor of annexation. That is incorrect. The member who supported annexation was Aaron Morgan. Tate was absent from the vote, but submitted a letter supporting annexation, which was read into public record by the chairperson, Donald Gilmore.