



# Richmond Confidential

Richmond council takes first steps to make North Richmond part of the city after 60 years of independence



Mayor Tom Butt and Councilmember Jovanka Beckles listen to a statement by Supervisor John Gioia on incorporating North Richmond at last Tuesday's city council meeting.

By [Josh Slowiczek](#) Posted October 21, 2017 6:57 pm

Tensions were high on Tuesday as Richmond City Council voted to bring North Richmond into the fold after 60 years of political isolation. Residents addressed officials with loud voices. Electeds shook heads and raised their eyebrows. At the end of the discussion, council voted to begin the process of annexing unincorporated North Richmond.

Each councilmember expressed interest in incorporation, but the evening's wedge issue was how to go about it.

In a 5-2 vote, it was decided that the city will formally begin the application process with the county, the first step in correcting what many say was a historic injustice. In addition,

informational material and a non-binding city ballot will be sent to North Richmond residents in order to gauge public opinion.

There were impassioned voices on both sides of the debate. Several North Richmond residents spoke out against annexation during the meeting, citing an increase in taxes and the area's own history of self-determination as the main reasons why they did not want to be incorporated. Others were for it, however, and spoke of the need for increased services and public safety. But fewer than 30 North Richmond residents chimed in — out of roughly 3,700.

This lackluster engagement reinforced the driving question of the night: What do the residents of North Richmond truly want?

Aaron Morgan, a 31-year-old North Richmond resident and member of its municipal advisory committee, said he was excited by the council's decision. He said that, beyond the new city services and increased political representation, incorporation of the area would strengthen Richmond as a whole.

"I believe in unity," he said. "Now, we've got one purpose and one goal for progress."

Richmond's approach to annexation will mirror what happened in the city of Antioch in 2014. It will begin the process by creating and submitting an application to Contra Costa county's Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO). At the same time, it will do public outreach and mail a nonbinding, advisory ballot to as many North Richmond residents as possible.

If the response to incorporation is overwhelmingly negative, Richmond will have the opportunity to retract its application.

Supervisor John Gioia suggested this approach during his comments to the council on Tuesday. "Last night's vote was about Richmond extending an offer to North Richmond residents to allow them to become part of Richmond," Gioia said. "I think it was a positive step forward."

Gioia, who has represented North Richmond at the county's board of supervisors for nearly two decades, said that residents' lack of awareness about the issue was apparent.

Lou Ann Texeira, an executive officer with LAFCO, commended the city's outreach plan. "That's a very key component when you've got controversy," she said.

The application itself will cost Richmond roughly \$8,000. Once the paperwork is received, it will take an additional six months for the first public hearing. Teixeira said there is plenty of work to be done, but “from a LAFCO perspective, it [annexation] makes sense.”

Councilmembers Jovanka Beckles and Eduardo Martinez both voted against the motion. They argued that starting the official LAFCO application before having a more thorough sense of public opinion was pre-emptive.

“I think depending on what the survey says, we may be throwing \$8,000 out the window,” said Martinez, adding that “North Richmond residents need to have time to learn what the process is about, and have time to state their preferences.”

Martinez supports annexation and sees benefits in incorporating the area. But he is also concerned that prematurely starting the LAFCO process is reflective of “paternalistic decision-making,” and said North Richmond residents should be allowed to exercise self-determination.

The council member’s position reflected a statement by the Richmond Progressive Alliance’s steering committee, which was released last week. It said the city “should not initiate the annexation process with LAFCO unless and until North Richmond votes in favor of it.”

Oscar Garcia, a 37-year-old life-long resident of Richmond, said he was concerned by the progressive group’s letter. “I was a little afraid that the whole thing was going to be derailed because they [the RPA] didn’t agree with the LAFCO process,” he said.

But Garcia was pleased with the city’s decision to inform and reach out to North Richmond residents, the majority of whom are Latino. He said he has family and friends living in the area who weren’t aware annexation was being discussed. He also said he has seen a lot of deaths due to the ongoing violence between gangs in Richmond and North Richmond, and hopes annexation will begin to address the issue.

Mayor Tom Butt shared his sentiment. But, like Beckles and Martinez, he expressed dissatisfaction with the outcome of Tuesday’s vote.

Butt would have preferred to leave out the ballot and proceed only with the official LAFCO process, which he said includes plenty of opportunities for North Richmond residents to voice their opinion.

The LAFCO process would reach out to registered voters and landowners, but the Richmond ballot will be sent out to a much broader category of residents. The logistical details of the

ballot were not discussed during the council meeting, but Gioia suggested that the city could work with utility providers to gain a more accurate sense of who was living in the area.

“I think it’s superfluous and redundant, and it’s got a lot of problems,” Butt said. “But that’s what we’re going to do, so we’ll figure it out.”