

Gioia: North Richmond will ultimately benefit from annexation

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Contra Costa County Supervisor John Gioia (left) poses with Doug Harris, the filmmaker behind the recent documentary, "North Richmond: Past Present and Future." Photo first appeared on John Gioia's Facebook page.

by John Gioia, Contra Costa County supervisor

I've had the honor and privilege of representing unincorporated North Richmond as its County Supervisor for the last 19 years. During this time, there have been many positive improvements in North Richmond as the result of strong partnerships between the County, City of Richmond, and dedicated local community leadership.

North Richmond now has a chance to advance these improvements, and build a better future by becoming part of the City of Richmond, instead of remaining an isolated pocket of unincorporated community governed by the County.

As many know, there is a community-wide discussion about whether North Richmond should be annexed into the City of Richmond. I believe that North Richmond residents will benefit over the long term by becoming part of the City.

I also strongly believe that the residents of North Richmond should have a strong voice in this decision and that it is critical to carefully study and understand this issue from many sides.

Contra Costa County currently provides municipal services to unincorporated North Richmond including public works, planning, law enforcement, and fire services. These services would be provided by the City of Richmond if annexation occurred. However, health and social services would continue to be provided by the County.

An advisory board made up of North Richmond residents (North Richmond Municipal Advisory Council) recently authorized Richmond and Contra Costa County to jointly fund an impartial study of the potential annexation. This study is meant to inform the residents, and the City and County, about the financial and service implications of annexation.

As part of the City of Richmond, unincorporated North Richmond property owners would pay a higher real property tax and real estate transfer tax, and residents would also pay a utility tax that they do not currently pay.

But renters, who make up a majority of North Richmond residents, would be protected under Richmond's existing rent control laws. The County has no rent control.

Many believe that annexation would achieve a better, safer and more prosperous future by allowing North Richmond residents the ability to have a voice in Richmond city elections, and representation through the City Council.

Annexation has the potential to make North Richmond and all of Richmond safer due to the elimination of boundaries between the City and County that divide law enforcement and first responder jurisdictions.

Becoming part of Richmond can mean more efficient delivery of important planning and public works services and easier access to Richmond City Hall, as opposed to the County headquarters, 20 miles away in Martinez.

It's important to understand the community's demographics and history.

North Richmond is a proud and strong community of 3,700 residents. Its rich history includes housing African-Americans who worked in the Richmond shipyards during World War II and

defended our democracy, nourishing a vibrant R & B music scene, and supporting manufacturing and urban agriculture.

It's also a community that was created, in part, by racist housing policies that restricted where African-Americans could buy homes, and by political gerrymandering when Richmond annexed areas of Hilltop and El Sobrante while bypassing North Richmond.

As a result, North Richmond is an isolated pocket totally surrounded by the city of Richmond, making it more challenging to effectively provide police and other vital municipal services.

In a letter to the City Council, former Richmond World War II Shipyard worker and longtime community activist Betty Reid Soskin said: "By annexing North Richmond into the city-as-a-whole, and therefore erasing the final signs of Richmond's dark history of segregation and discrimination, we will make real "One Richmond," in order to continue on the path of forming that '...more perfect Union'."

Ultimately, North Richmond residents and property owners will determine whether increased taxes are a reasonable investment to support more convenient and potentially more effective city services. I respect their views and voice.

Whether or not North Richmond becomes part of the City of Richmond, I will remain committed to providing the best services to residents and continuing the existing strong partnerships to improve the quality of life for all residents.

Mike Aldax

