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# Richmond to Chevron: Listen to Our Residents' Safety Concerns

By Ted Goldberg Nov 9

Richmond city leaders sent a recording of a recent city council meeting to Chevron executives documenting the concerns local residents have about a significant malfunction the oil giant's refinery recently experienced that has led the facility to send gases to its flares on and off for days.

The proposal to send the video to the company, which passed unanimously last Tuesday night, came after two Chevron officials gave a presentation to the city council about the accident that took place during last month's massive storm, which triggered the facility to belch out flames and smoke.

Members of the city council and local residents said at the meeting they were dissatisfied by the explanation and are looking for answers.

"That Chevron presentation was a lot of talk and nothing was learned," said Randy Joseph, who lives in Richmond. "There were a bunch of non-answers. We've learned nothing about what happened during the flaring."

The problems began Oct. 4, when an "atmospheric river" brought strong rain and wind to the Bay Area. The refinery says it lost some power and steam production, leading to a small fire and several process units going offline. That triggered a safety technique, known as flaring, in which the facility sends gases to its flares to relieve pressure and stabilize operations.

That day, Richmond resident Floy Andrews said she could smell what seemed like fuel from her porch. "I was basically slammed with this petroleum odor. It was overwhelming," she told the council.

Flaring at Chevron's Richmond refinery as seen from Berkeley's César Chávez Park on Nov. 2, 2020. *(Queena Kim/KQED)*

Several days after the refinery lost steam and power, the company sent a preliminary report to Contra Costa County health officials that revealed that, in the first two days of flaring, the facility released close to 17 tons of sulfur dioxide.

In its report to the county, during last Tuesday's presentation and in multiple statements, Chevron has emphasized that the air quality tests it took — and ones that local agencies conducted — did not detect any violations of health standards.

However, local air regulators are investigating whether Chevron's flaring led to a series of odors in the area, according to Ralph Borrmann, a representative of the Bay Area Air Quality Management District.

The day after the storm, the West Contra Costa Unified School District closed Richmond High along with Ford and Peres elementary schools because of a strong fuel-like odor.

Three days later, on Oct. 28, teachers and students at Richmond High smelled gas again and were briefly evacuated.

It's unclear what caused the odors at the school campuses.

As recently as last Friday afternoon, county supervisor John Gioia, who sits on the board that oversees the air district, said he felt sick from an odor at Richmond's Martin Luther King Jr. track.

"There is a strong objectionable gasoline odor here," Gioia tweeted. "I can hardly stand it. It makes me feel nauseous."

Over the weekend, Chevron representative Linsi Crain emphasized that the company does not believe the odor Gioia experienced was tied to the refinery's flaring and that company crews conducted air samplings and found no health violations.

"We don't believe this report is linked to our facility," Crain wrote in an email.

During last Tuesday's council meeting, Chevron's refinery process safety manager Patricia Roberts tried to soothe concerns from local residents and city officials about the problems the refinery has been experiencing.

"Normally, we only want to come to the city council with good news," Roberts said at the beginning of her presentation.

"I'm sorry to have to come to talk to you guys about an incident. I understand there's a lot of community concern about flaring and the noise and the visual impacts that it makes," she said.

Roberts emphasized that flaring is a safety technique that helps the refinery reduce dangers to the surrounding area.

"We never want to flare. We do everything that we can to avoid it. And, when we do have to flare, we try to stop it as fast as possible," she said.

Another Chevron official, refinery reliability manager Laura Leeds, told the council all of the company's air quality tests showed that none of the releases violated health regulations.

"I don't feel that anybody should be concerned about their health because there was nothing detectable," Leeds said.

The company's presentation before the council did not reveal anything the Chevron's 72-hour report hadn't said a week earlier.

Mayor Tom Butt said the refinery should have provided more details, an apology and a plan to fix the situation.

"I'm disappointed in the presentation," Butt said. "I expect something better from Chevron when they're invited to come to talk to the public like this. I think you should show a little contriteness."

Roberts and Leeds explained that another refinery official, who could have addressed some of the council's questions, couldn't make the meeting.

Several members of the council, including Melvin Willis, said the intermittent releases had their constituents worried about their health and yearning for information.

"Seeing the rain and then seeing flames in the air one day and then to wake up the next day with more flames and wake up in the middle of the night to text messages at 3 a.m., talking about more flaring and people reporting odors, it's kind of hard not to be concerned," Willis said.

City and county officials — and some members of the public — say Chevron just needs to provide more detailed information about what's going on when the refinery is having problems.

"The communication with the community is vital," said Richmond resident Don Gosney. "Chevron needs to do a better job. Everybody needs to do a better job on this."

Chevron does post some information about refinery accidents on its Facebook page and often refers people to its fence-line air

monitoring page. County and city officials often issue alerts through Nixle and Twitter. Many of those posts, though, do not include details about the cause of a refinery problem or how long it may lead to gas releases.

Councilmember Nate Bates proposed that the city send a recording of the meeting to Chevron executives so they could see and hear the concerns from members of the public.

"They need to understand how serious this community is about flaring," Bates said.

The city then sent a link of a one-hour portion of the meeting to Chevron. A top company executive said he watched the video and would share it with others at the firm.

"After decades working in refining, I understand that flaring can be a concern to some that aren't familiar with its essential function in protecting people and the environment," Chris Cavote, a Chevron executive, wrote to the city.

Cavote said a key refinery official, a facility manager, couldn't make it to the meeting because the closed session of the hearing ran longer than expected the manager had to leave for a personal matter. He said that the company plans to respond to some of the questions the council posed that the two other refinery officials couldn't answer.

"While we would rather not flare, it is sometimes necessary to relieve pressure or combust gases we can't recover so that they aren't vented into the atmosphere," he said.

Cavote then warned that as the refinery ramped up to full operations over several days, there could be more intermittent flaring on the horizon.

Chevron has had more flaring operations than any other refinery in the county the last five years, according to data from the health department. The recent round, though, has increased worries from Contra Costa's top refinery regulator.

"The Contra Costa Health Services is extremely concerned with the increased number of flaring incidents at (the) Chevron Richmond refinery," Matthew Kaufmann, director of the county's hazardous materials program, wrote in an email last week.

That agency has asked Chevron to provide more details about its recent problems - due later this month and set to be posted here. The air district also requires the company to submit a causal report 60 days after the initial incident, which is expected to be posted here.

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