A Social Policy Case Study and Follow-up on Richmond Progressive Alliance Two Years Later: Richmond Progressive Alliance: Defeating Big Money in Politics

Written by Mike Parker

Richmond, California, in the San Francisco Bay Area, population 108,000, was an industrial town and site of the famous World War II Kaiser shipyards. Most industries left after the war, leaving the city with blight, high unemployment, crime, and polluted land. The Chevron refinery has long been the dominant social, economic, and political power in Richmond. In the last fifteen years the city’s population has changed from 36% African-American and 26% Latino to 40% Latino and 25% African-American, while the Asian and white populations have stayed about the same (15% and 20%). This rapid demographic shift is reflected in Richmond politics. Starting in 2004, a progressive movement slowly began to take on the city’s problems and Chevron’s domination. In 2006 voters elected a Green mayor and later elected councilmembers to turn Richmond into a city known for its progressive programs on immigrant rights, stopping foreclosures, minimum wage, and environmental clean-up. Most of all, it is known for standing up to Chevron.

Much of this story was told in Social Policy, Summer 2013. (http://richmondprogressivealliance.net/History.html) Here is an update and some analysis about how this was accomplished.

Richmond, California, was one of the very few bright spots for progressives in what was a depressing 2014 election across the United States. Not only did Richmond progressives buck the national trend, they did so against what would seem to be overwhelming forces. The oil giant Chevron, number three on the Fortune 500 list, pumped more than $3 million directly into the city council campaign and funneled much more through indirect channels. Supporting Chevron was an array of forces, including obvious allies like the Council of Industries and the realtors, but also the building trades, police, and fire unions and groups that received financial aid from Chevron, including the Black American Political Action Committee, a network of African-American churches and non-profit leaders.

Chevron’s goal was to defeat the candidates of the Richmond Progressive Alliance (RPA). The company spent a half million dollars on a separate PAC solely to issue hit pieces against Mayor Gayle McLaughlin (termed out and running for council), Jovanka Beckles (running for reelection), and Eduardo Martinez (narrowly defeated in 2012), who ran together as Team Richmond.
We wanted Chevron support for the community hospital
Illustrations by David Moore

Connecting Chevron candidates and coattails for council to Chevron (2014)
The Team Richmond slate urged voters to also choose Councilmembers Tom Butt for mayor and Jael Myrick for a partial-term council seat. An independent campaign committee, the Working Families Coalition—supported by Service Employees (SEIU) Local 1021, the California Nurses Association, and the Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment (ACCE) — supported all five candidates together during the last weeks of the campaign. Chevron mounted no campaign targeting Butt or Myrick, though it did fund Butt’s opponent for mayor, Nat Bates.

Team Richmond won despite refusing all corporate contributions, and Butt and Myrick also defeated their opponents.

Other views of the election story can be found in Social Policy Winter 14 or in a report by Gayle McLaughlin. (http://bettrichmond.net/2014/Report/report.pdf) As both make clear, key to the
win was not what the campaign did during the election but the RPA’s years of organizing and consistent political efforts that preceded it.

Lead Up to the 2014 Election

Fall 2012 saw some stinging defeats. Voters turned down a city tax on sugary drinks as well as our two candidates for council (Eduardo Martinez, narrowly lost). Although our sugary-drinks campaign was the catalyst for successful campaigns in Mexico and in nearby Berkeley and helped to fuel a growing national consciousness on the issue, the local losses were very hard for an organization of volunteers. The period after the 2012 election saw needed rebuilding.

We rebuilt by continuing to focus on Richmond issues:

• LGBTQ

Respect After the election, RPA’s opponents began an offensive against Councilmember Jovanka Beckles, an out lesbian. Many of these attacks came from self-described clergy. (See a sample of these confrontations at city council meetings). (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ftLjerZYwa0) The campaign included intimidation of a
high school LGBTQ group being honored by council for its work with Richmond’s youth, as well as an attempt to physically intimidate Beckles after a council meeting. Beckles saw an outpouring of support from the LGBTQ community in the Bay Area, which RPA helped organize.

• **Stopping Foreclosures**

Richmond residents were hit hard in the foreclosure crisis. Residents who could barely afford payments before the 2008 crash were now unable to get by. Almost half the city’s mortgages were underwater (house values had fallen below what owners still owed). Foreclosures often meant vacant houses that were then stripped or damaged, creating blight that reduced the value of surrounding properties.

The rational solution for mortgage holders, residents, and the community was to reduce each under-water mortgage to an amount more in line with the current value of the house, which is the maximum the mortgage holder would get if the property were foreclosed. In some cases, banks agreed-- sometimes under the pressure of picket lines, sit-ins, or media campaigns.

The biggest problem was the large number of mortgages that had been sliced, diced, bundled and sold to pension funds and other mortgage holders by the industry to hide mortgages with shaky financing. Because mortgage ownership was disbursed, there was no bank or other lending institution with the power to make a settlement. Consequently these houses ended up in foreclosure.

Under the leadership of the city manager, Mayor McLaughlin, ACCE, and the RPA, in 2013 we developed a program to refinance these mortgages, making them more manageable for the home owner. The city would buy the mortgage (not the property) at fair market value, and provide a new mortgage to the current home owner at a reasonable price that allowed the owner to stay in the home. If the mortgage holder refused the offer, the city would acquire the property by eminent domain, refinance the loan, and allow the owners to stay. Eminent domain, usually used to kick people out of their homes to allow big projects, would here be used to keep people in their homes.

Initially, most of the council supported this plan, but after the real estate and banking industries organized to apply intense pressure, those Councilmembers who were not RPA members slowly withdrew their support. Consistent organizing kept the program alive in the community. An attempt to form a Joint Powers Authority with at least one other city proved difficult, as real estate interests and banks in each city put fierce pressure on city governments not to participate.

In the end, this part of the anti-foreclosure program was effectively killed by the power of the banks nationally when Congress passed, and President Obama signed in late 2014, legislation that forbade the FHA to finance any house taken by eminent domain.
• Voice for the Latino Community

Latinos now make up 40% of Richmond’s population and 60% of the student body in the public schools, and are the largest ethnic group in Richmond. Yet Latinos had the least political influence with only one of seven council member and zero of five school board members in 2013. Large numbers were undocumented (an estimated 8% of county residents and certainly higher in Richmond) could not vote. Fear of attracting attention from the authorities chilled political involvement for many Latinos who could vote. In addition, the RPA needed a better way for reaching the Latino population.

To create links between the progressive political movement and the Latino community, Juan Reardon, a founder of the RPA and one of its main leaders, organized a bilingual monthly newspaper, La Voz de Richmond, (http://betterrichmond.net/2014/LaVoz/) which operated independently from the RPA. The first issue was distributed throughout the city in July 2013 and the newspaper was successful in bringing political information about their city to Latinos. Given the enormous effort and cost of printing such a paper, however, the effort could not be maintained in 2015.

• Services for Reentry, Not Jails
In 2011, following a court order that required California to reduce overcrowding in state prisons, thousands of nonviolent inmates became the responsibility of the counties. The legislature allocated “realignment funds” to the counties to handle the influx. The Contra Costa County Sheriff insisted that the bulk of the funds go to increasing jail capacity. A coalition led by Contra Costa Interfaith Supporting Organization (CCISCO) and others, including the RPA, demanded that the county spend the money on services for reentry into the civilian population and on job training to reduce recidivism.

The Latino community was a critical part of the mobilization against building more jails. Latinos understood that that a significant number of jail facilities were rented out to the immigration police to hold deportees. It was a long battle with many long drives to the county seat, but in early 2013 we won.

**Saving Doctor’s Hospital**

After a tax ballot measure failed in early 2014 Doctor’s Hospital, the only public hospital in West Contra Costa County (Richmond is the largest city in this area), announced that because of high numbers of indigent patients served and insufficient repayment from public funds the hospital was no longer viable and might close. The closing would make medical care that much harder for the already underserved indigent population in Richmond. In addition, because Doctor’s was the only facility in the area equipped to give emergency care to heart attack or stroke victims, the closing would endanger all living in West County.

The California Nurses Association, strongly supported by the RPA and other groups, led the campaign to keep Doctor’s open. We targeted government agencies and corporations that had the money. We said that, given that the only other public hospital in the county was more than 20 miles away (often over heavily clogged roads) the county had a responsibility to the citizens of West County to help keep Doctor’s alive.

We argued that given the potential for catastrophic events at local refineries (the 2012 Chevron refinery fire had sent 15,000 to seek medical care), Chevron should contribute. We appealed to the area’s private hospitals, Kaiser and Sutter Health, which without Doctor’s would be inundated with emergencies. The City of Richmond offered a significant amount of money, but the county would not take responsibility for keeping the hospital open.

For a while it looked like we might save the hospital, but in the end, a conservative county board of supervisors, the refusal of the private hospitals to cooperate, and the refusal of the refineries in the region to contribute led Doctor’s Hospital to finally close leaving West County residents without adequate emergency care.
• Battling Chevron for a Cleaner Richmond

In 2005 Chevron initiated a huge expansion of its refinery. In 2008 despite massive community meetings drawing 1,000 residents, most of whom opposed the Chevron’s expansion plan, the Chevron-supported majority of city council members, voted to approve the project’s Environmental Impact Report (EIR). Under California law, the EIR certifies that a project does not negatively impact the environment (including air quality, ecology, noise, traffic, culture, employment, housing, etc.) or mitigates the impact.

The EIR is the vehicle that gives the community some power over a private corporation’s plans. Environmental groups took the EIR approval to court. In 2009 two panels of judges appointed by a Republican governor found that the EIR was indeed faulty. For example, the EIR’s claims that the refinery would not be processing heavier (more polluting) crude oil contradicted what Chevron had said in its shareholders report.

Chevron could have revised its EIR but instead chose to stop the project abruptly, laying off 1300 construction workers. While Chevron likely stopped the project because of the 2008 economic crash, which reduced the need for immediate increased capacity, the company PR machine blamed the environmentalists for the lost jobs.
In August of 2012 a huge fire destroyed a big section of the refinery, endangering both refinery workers and the surrounding community. In 2013 the US Chemical Safety Board held hearings to determine why the fire occurred. At the same time Chevron was planning to start up its expansion project again, processing heavier and dirtier crude. An environmental coalition that was led by Communities for a Better Environment (CBE) and included the RPA worked hard to put conditions on this so called “Modernization Project.” The main points the coalition organized around were:

• Better public safety oversite. Chevron could not be trusted to ensure the safety of the community. The fire proved that. (See the U.S. Chemical Safety Board report (http://www.csb.gov/chevron-refinery-fire/) and especially the fire animation.

• Modernization to make the refinery safer. As the fire had shown, the refinery had a lot of outdated and worn equipment and piping.

• An absolute reduction of pollution. Chevron’s view was that the law permitted it to keep polluting at the same levels as in the past, meaning that they felt the right to poison us was grandfathered.

• A decrease in greenhouse gas emissions. Time and again we made it clear that we supported modernization of the refinery and the jobs it would bring, but that modernization had to make the process cleaner and safer, not simply allow Chevron to process a heavier and more polluting type of crude oil.

Chevron ran a massive PR campaign designed to convince residents that its modernization project as they proposed was certain to be more efficient, cleaner, and safer. It held telephone town halls, put out many mailings, bought up every billboard, ran TV spots, and had a large PR staff speaking at every possible meeting. RPA members and other volunteers worked hard to give alternative points of view at community meetings. We did letter-writing campaigns to the media. At hearings and mass meetings, we organized residents to speak. The two RPA members on the council, Beckles and Mayor McLaughlin, consistently challenged Chevron’s claims and demanded stricter standards. The RPA and the Asian Pacific Environmental Network raised the money to send a mailing from the environmental coalition to residents to explain the complex issues.

The Richmond Planning Commission, with the leadership of two RPA commissioners, voted unanimously to approve the project but with conditions that would achieve our goals. As time went on Richmond residents became increasingly suspicious of Chevron and demanded more.

Other politicians in the state began to pay attention.

As a result, although not meeting the community safety goals, Chevron made several important changes to the project to make it cleaner and produce less greenhouse gas.

Since the seven-member council had two RPA members and two die-hard Chevron supporters, Nat Bates and Corky Boozé, Chevron was able to negotiate with the three councilmembers in the
middle (Butt, Myrick, and Jim Rogers). The three voted for a revised EIR in return for a community benefits agreement that included the three’s favored projects, the biggest, a $35 million scholarship program. We thought there was a good chance we could also win from Chevron the money needed to keep Doctor’s Hospital open, but the three pushed through the EIR and the community benefits agreement without support for Doctor’s.

After this agreement in July 2014, we publicly celebrated what the community had won by standing up for itself and what still had to be done to make the refinery safe for the community, its workers, and the climate.

**Importance of Community Struggles**

These community struggles were an essential part of the 2014 election. Or, one could say, the election was an extension of these struggles and the RPA served as the bridge. As the RPA worked with the many excellent community activists and organizations who led these struggles, they in turn came to know and trust the RPA. Mayor McLaughlin and Councilmember Beckles gave the fights a political voice.

And RPA participation strengthened the fights.

The RPA office, the Bobby Bowens Progressive Center, named after a former Black Panther who became a courageous community activist and was on the RPA steering committee until his death, became an inexpensive, accessible meeting place and work space for all sorts of community groups. We used the RPA newsletter and database to mobilize for public events. RPA political and organizing experience helped the campaigns gain political access at critical times.

Most importantly, participation in these campaigns identified the RPA with these issues. For example, it meant that during the election period we did not have to put out a special mailing about our candidates’ support for LGBTQ rights. People already knew where we stood. They knew where we stood on Chevron’s pollution, on immigrant rights, jail expansion, and on reentry programs. The fact that our candidates were identified with progressive positions on all these important issues allowed them to focus on what we considered the main issues in the campaign, which were Chevron’s political bullying and the larger issue of money in politics.

There were other critical strengths that we took into the 2014 campaign.
Greg Karras (CBE scientist) makes case against Chevron at council meeting
A Core of Community-Based Political Leaders

Over ten years and many campaigns, the RPA had developed a core of people who are highly committed to the progressive movement, have a detailed knowledge of Richmond, are experienced campaigners, and have a political vision that keeps them focused. We know how to get mailings prepared and distributed without a campaign consultant. We know how to get the data we need from the county and how to get legislation before the city council.

Early in 2014 we briefly considered hiring a campaign consultant but after interviewing possible candidates decided that we actually knew more about running a community-based campaign than most consultants and that our money was better spent directly on the campaign.

Much knowledge of the technical aspects of election campaigns and electoral mechanics was acquired early on and shared with others by Juan Reardon, who had a long history of activism in Argentina and the U.S. but no experience in electoral politics. As Gayle McLaughlin’s campaign
manager for council in 2004 and for mayor in 2006, Reardon learned local electoral politics. His clearest contribution to the jump-start of the progressive movement in Richmond was the firm understanding that progressive electoral work must be free of corporate money and must make that fact central to our identity. This principle remains part of the RPA’s DNA and is our strongest letter of introduction to local voters.

Other early leaders made important contributions about toxins, racist police policies, and nonprofit work and built upon the lessons of the 2004 and 2006 election campaigns.¹

The development of many leaders who could propose direction in complicated situations that demanded quick response, who could organize others, and who could serve as effective spokespersons on the various issues, was critical to the success of the RPA.

The politics of the 2014 campaign—progressive politics with no corporate funding, to battle Chevron—attracted many skilled local who made substantial time commitments to lead the campaign.² They brought in new database, web, and organizing and political skills. They led the more than 200 volunteers who put in hours per week canvassing, calling, writing, doing office work, and all the other tasks necessary to win.

RPA’s politics also attracted volunteers from other parts of the country who spent weeks volunteering on the campaign.³
A Party in Non-Partisan Elections

The importance of the RPA’s continuity as a political organization cannot be stressed enough. In a sense the RPA functioned as a political party in what are called nonpartisan elections.

Nonpartisan elections were originally put in place by local elites as a way to reduce the political power of the growing urban poor. Most people do not pay close attention to elections and even less to “down-ballot” elections like city council. The way people handle overwhelming information is to organize it, and an important way of organizing information in elections is by party identification. It does not tell you everything, but knowing that someone is a Republican tells you a lot.

When elections are nonpartisan with candidates not identified by party, voters do not investigate carefully each candidate’s backgrounds and positions. Rather they tend to rely on other cues and on leaders to help them sort the candidates out. In nonpartisan races, the name of the candidate, endorsements by local newspapers, by local organizations, and the money to put out mass mailings and billboards all become more powerful.

Through our consistent involvement, year round, in politics the RPA became a reference point for voters to understand what issues were really being decided in the election and what forces
were behind the different candidates. Voters knew that if a candidate was RPA, he or she was against Chevron’s pollution and would stand against the company’s attempt to buy the electorate.

This notion of a political organization in local politics that engages its members on the issues, supports candidates over many elections, learns from its mistakes, builds its database of contacts, and expands its reputation should seem rather obvious. But there is considerable force against it. The local Democratic Party considers such an independent organization a threat. In Richmond, County Democratic Party leaders have privately counseled activists who join the RPA that they are damaging their future possibilities in politics.

At the same time working against the RPA is the ideology taught in schools and maintained by the media that citizens should vote for the individual, not the party. Even some individuals supporting our politics, insisted that they were voting for individuals, not an “RPA slate.” The RPA does also not fit into the non-profit model of politics. As the right wing has shredded the social safety net programs, non-profit organizations have grown to fill the vacuum and do important work. Many progressive struggles are also organized by non-profits. In some cases their non-profit status allows them to take tax-deductible contributions but, it also requires them to stay out of campaigns for elected office.

Such tax exempt non-profits are thus barred from doing the most important phase of policy change—making sure that the officials elected are people who will actually carry out the policies. Many of those in the tax exempt non-profit world turn this legal separation of tax exempt non-profits and electoral politics into an ideological plus. In doing so they reinforce the ideology that many activists embrace out of fruitless experience with elections: “Elections are not that important. If you work hard on issues, you can force the politicians to do what you want.”

What these notions fail to recognize is that officials who have been elected by particular forces or deeper financial pockets will feel a debt to such sources. Perhaps more importantly, this notion that tax exempt nonprofits benefit from staying out of political activity fails to understand the immense potential of community representatives and elected officials working together. It fails to acknowledge how important elected officials can be in leading change, rather than simply responding to various pressures. And it fails to recognize that control of state power is what protects the system of inequality and oppression that we want to dismantle. This ideology leads some activists to depend on working behind the scenes with elected officials and candidates instead of developing an open connection between elected officials and issue campaigns, or, better yet, building groups like the RPA that are both electoral and non-electoral.
Candidate Jocenka Beckles: Our ground campaign with lots of volunteers was central
“Air Wars” and Ground Campaign

In the run-up to the November 2014 election, the Chevron air campaign (relying on media, and mailings) centered on hit-piece mailers against each of the Team Richmond candidates. The company funded dozens of mailers—so many that voters began to resent and ignore them—and reserved almost every billboard in Richmond, and many in surrounding cities. Chevron charged that Mayor McLaughlin flew all over the world instead of attending to business in Richmond. (In fact she made three trips abroad in eight years in office: to Chevron’s damage in Ecuador, Richmond’s sister city in Cuba, and the co-ops of Mondragon, Spain.) She traveled far less and missed far fewer meetings than Chevron-supported Nat Bates, but for those who did not see McLaughlin at work, the mailers raised questions. Leaflets spuriously charged Beckles with using city funds to pay for lavish meals. Chevron accused Eduardo Martinez of being an anarchist, lifting a Halloween picture from his Facebook page and a quote out of context.

As disgusting as this kind of smear campaigning is, it usually works. It starts conversations and rumors. It requires campaigners to be able to answer questions about these charges rather than serious issues, and it helps reinforce the belief that all politics and everyone who runs for office...
are corrupt, so why bother? It suppresses voter participation among the population most concerned with good government.

We could not compete with an equal barrage of mailers or billboards. We did not try to answer all the spurious charges in our own mailers, but stressed differences on issues. Toward the end of the campaign, to distinguish our literature from the flood of Chevron’s mailers, we mailed and distributed to all voter households two issues of The Richmond Sun, (http://betterr Richmond.net/2014/Sun/) an eight-page campaign newspaper that was very popular. With liberal use of cartoons but plenty of facts for the reading-inclined, the Sun laid out the issues, compared the candidates, and made fun of Chevron’s hit pieces.

It was not simply, as some believe, that Chevron had “overreached” with its media blitz. The company employed consultants with national and local experience. They used the same strategy of negative campaigning and overpowering with mailers and out-of-context assertions that worked so well across the country. But we were able to turn their campaign against them.

We gave our canvassers copies of Chevron’s hit pieces with the “paid for by Chevron” small print highlighted. We gave them answers to the hit pieces. We made Chevron’s campaign our prime example of how money corrupts politics. Many canvassers reported talking to people who
said they were not going to vote for anybody because they had heard Gayle was making all these trips. It took fairly little explanation, and showing voters the source of these stories. Some even became angry and committed to talking with neighbors to dispel rumors.

Our ground campaign violated many traditional rules.

Most mainstream campaigns use canvassers to identify already-convinced and probable voters for GOTV on Election Day and stress the importance of moving as quickly as possible to reach more and more voters. In contrast, we urged canvassers to take the time to talk to voters, to set as their goal that any potential supporter would understand the issues well enough to talk to their neighbors. That, of course, meant providing information to and having discussions with the canvassers so they could go well beyond any script. Voters easily could tell the difference between our canvassers and those of the Chevron candidates.

We have concrete evidence of the power of both Chevron’s air war and our approach to canvassing.

Through a combination of miscues, one precinct was not covered by the Team Richmond ground campaign in the last weeks before the election. In all but four of Richmond’s 45 precincts the percentage vote for Martinez and Beckles increased between the initial count of absentee ballots, many of which were mailed in several weeks before the election, and the final count of Election Day votes. Many of the precincts showed double-digit increases. Of the four precincts where support declined over the last weeks of the campaign, in three the decline was less than 3%. But in the one precinct we had not covered, support for Martinez and Beckles decreased by 11% and 15%.
The 2014 Election Candidates

We started our election work in 2013.

Recruiting candidates and coming up with a council slate was relatively easy. Beckles was running for reelection. McLaughlin, who could not run for mayor again because of term limits, agreed to run for council because this election gave us a chance to finally get a truly progressive city council. Martinez had narrowly missed election two years previously and had been working hard with community and environmental groups since then. We decided not to compete for the partial-term council position that Jael Myrick had been appointed to, as Myrick was someone we could work with.

Identifying a mayoral candidate was much more difficult. In 2013 we tried very hard to find an acceptable candidate for mayor, one who was not an RPA member but who held compatible views. We were mainly interested in defeating Chevron and in getting progressive policies adopted. We approached Councilmember Tom Butt, who declined. We also approached some activists, including Doria Robinson, the leader of Urban Tilth, an award-winning urban
agriculture group that had good success in working with youth of color. After much thought about the burden the race and the office would put on her family, Robinson declined.

Going into 2014, the front-running mayoral candidates were Councilmember Nat Bates, supported by Chevron, and the president of the school board, Charles Ramsey, who had already raised $100,000 from building trades unions for his campaign. The RPA interviewed Ramsey but rejected him because of his closeness to developers, his unwillingness to reject corporate contributions, and his lack of support for progressive struggles in Richmond, although to his credit, Ramsey was one of the African-American leaders who early spoke in support of LGBTQ rights.) After much consideration, the RPA decided to support Mike Parker (a key RPA activist and the author of this article) for mayor.

The four candidates agreed to have common mailers, billboards, t-shirts, door-to-door campaigns, and a phone bank. In other words, the effort was very much a “slate” campaign: “Vote Team Richmond—Reject the Chevron Candidates.” Individual candidates’ literature all included a “Vote Team Richmond” section with a picture of the whole slate.

At the same time, individual campaign committees took care of each candidate’s literature, priorities, schedule, and finances.

For most people, the RPA and Team Richmond were interchangeable. But there were important differences. The RPA carefully avoided any financial involvement in the campaigns. The campaigns paid their own expenses and shared Team Richmond expenses equally. The Team Richmond coordinating committee, with representatives from each campaign, was not the same as the RPA steering committee. The RPA continued its policy of no endorsement for any candidate who accepted corporate contributions. Team Richmond endorsed Butt and Myrick over their Chevron-funded opponents because of our strong interest in defeating Chevron, although some RPA members felt this was a mistake.

The campaign began early in March 2014 with house meetings and preparing literature and slowly ramped up with door-to-door activity and fundraising.
All four candidates campaigned vigorously throughout the summer and by most accounts were doing very well. Despite Ramsey’s money, polls showed that Parker was well ahead of Ramsey. Ramsey dropped out of the mayor’s race and announced for council instead, supported by Chevron. Two days before the August deadline for candidate filing, Tom Butt decided to run for mayor. Butt argued that he could beat Bates but that Parker, who had far less name recognition, could not.

We disagreed and tried to convince Butt to support Parker, but Butt insisted on running. With only a couple of days to make a decision, the campaigns and RPA held a flurry of meetings. Most of the campaign teams and activists agreed that the best course was for Parker to withdraw in favor of Butt. Most felt that in a three-way race, the progressive vote would be divided and Chevron candidate Bates would win. Failing to unite to defeat Chevron for the mayor’s seat would hurt our council races.

Parker withdrew and became the campaign manager for Team Richmond, now reduced to three candidates. (We literally sawed Parker’s name off the lawn signs to save the expense of reprinting them.)

The campaign put up a few billboards and did several mailings to voters. But mainly we relied on volunteers holding house meetings, going door to door, and campaigning at events. When vandals smeared our large signs with black paint, an artist committee held public repair sessions. Chevron logos turned up on the billboards of Chevron-endorsed candidates.

We also held one major campaign event: independent Senator Bernie Sanders, who was touring the country to assess whether to run for President as a Democrat or Independent, accepted an invitation to speak in Richmond to endorse the Team Richmond candidates and Butt and Myrick. Even with short notice, the event drew 500 people. It is unlikely that Sanders’s endorsement yielded any new votes we did not already have, but having a U.S.
Senator come to Richmond was a huge boost to campaign morale and legitimacy, strengthened our ground operations, and boosted campaign contributions.

After the Election

After the election we had very high hopes for progress in Richmond. The city drew national attention in the nationwide protests over the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. A photograph of Police Chief Chris Magnus holding a “Black Lives Matter” sign swept the country. The picture symbolized how community policing policy had greatly improved the relationship between the city and its residents as well as greatly reducing violent crime.

However, the cooperation between Team Richmond and Butt and Myrick quickly broke down. Even before the new council was seated, divisions over a development project foreshadowed a difference on how to approach this critical question for the city. Because of the city’s reputation for violence and pollution, for years developers had shied away from Richmond. Then followed the crash of 2008. But now, with rapid growth everywhere in the Bay Area, Richmond was starting to look attractive to developers.

A developer wanted to build new houses in a desirable area on the Bay and wanted building height restrictions lifted. The RPA members on the outgoing council supported a strong neighborhood demand to limit the height of the new project to the current zoned restrictions.

Myrick and Butt pushed through a change in the city plan that would allow future developers much greater latitude in all large projects. They charged that the RPA was against all development and that residents’ resistance to it was an example of NIMBY.
Once the new council was seated, RPAers were optimistic when Butt made some excellent choices in filling his staff. Butt and his staff actively supported a community campaign to oppose the Sheriff’s request to expand the jail in Richmond.

But the big issue was the council’s appointment of a new member to fill Butt’s vacated seat. Contrary to the understanding reached between RPA and Butt when he asked Parker to drop out of the mayor’s race, Butt was unwilling to accept an RPA leader, arguing that he did not want a council with a majority of RPA members (four out of seven). Butt said he wanted council to appoint a person more like himself, a “moderate.”

The RPA and its allies then backed a Latina immigrant activist, Claudia Jimenez, who was not an RPA member but had led important community struggles, including the one to divert state funds from building prisons to providing reentry services. Butt opposed her, claiming she had insufficient experience.

The debate stretched out more than a month and turned ugly. Butt and some of his supporters portrayed the RPA as a conspiratorial cabal making a power grab. They had no problem with a Democratic Party majority on council, in the legislature, or in Congress, but a majority of council identifying with the RPA was a threat to democracy.

In a confusing vote, Martinez ended up providing the needed support to Butt, Myrick, and Bates to appoint “anyone but another RPA member.” Vinay Pimplé, with little government experience, little community involvement, and unknown views on many issues, was appointed to the seat.

The “Millionaires Tax” was very popular
Rent Control

The most controversial issue in Richmond for most of 2015 continues to be rent control. Over the last few years the technology boom centered in Silicon Valley has spread to San Francisco and across the Bay to Oakland and Berkeley. Technology giants like Apple and Google have been running private buses to all these cities. Housing prices in San Francisco continue to shoot up. Working people continue to be driven out of San Francisco to the East Bay in search of affordable rents. This gentrification process has boosted rents in the East Bay displacing lower income long-time residents. In early 2015, since the process was not yet as advanced in Richmond, progressives began thinking about how to keep people in their homes and build more affordable housing.

The Richmond section of the Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment (ACCE) was actively organizing tenants. A major catalyst for the fight for rent control and just cause for evictions was a 40% rent increase in one apartment building. In early 2014 council members started a discussion of rent stabilization and what we could do about rising rents. Over six months, city staff held several community meetings and gathered alternatives ranging from letting the market “do its thing” to voluntary mediation of disputes and rent control.

But options were limited. In 1995 landlords in California had pushed through state legislation that greatly limited what we could do. Under this legislation single-family homes and buildings constructed since 1995 could not be subject to any form of rent control. For those that could be controlled, landlords were allowed to set whatever rent they wanted when an apartment was empty, unless the vacancy was caused by the landlord.
In early 2015 a rent control coalition of about 20 community groups led by ACCE, Tenants Together (a Bay Area tenants’ rights group with extensive legal experience), SEIU Local 1021, and the RPA proposed essential ordinance points and organized a support campaign. City staff wrote the ordinance based on general direction from the council. Mayor Butt led the public opposition to rent control with a barrage of articles. Butt and his supporters used the issue to bash the RPA.

In August, after months of council and community discussion and argument, the council passed a rent control/just-cause ordinance. While landlords could set whatever initial price they wanted when the unit was vacant, increases in rent for continuing tenants were limited to an inflation index. Landlords had a procedure to ask a rent Board for increases in special circumstances. It was really rent stabilization, which helped renters stay in their apartments instead of being displaced by unaffordable increases. We believed this was not only good for renters but important for the entire community as rapid turnover in rental units destabilizes a neighborhood. And a stable community where people know their neighbors is critical for safety, community programs, and schools.

The ordinance also included that “just cause” be required for eviction, which gave tenants some rights and protections. Immediately after the ordinance passed, the California Apartment Association used a procedure in the state constitution to attack it. A petition with valid signatures of 10% of the voters (about 4,200) submitted in a 30-day period immediately suspends an ordinance and forces a city council to either rescind it or put it to the voters in an election.
Normally, gathering that many signatures in such a short period is very difficult.

But California allows paid signature-gatherers. While gatherers normally get $1 to $3 per signature, the Apartment Association offered $12 and in some reports $20. These rates attracted signature-gatherers from around the state. The rates, and in at least some cases the organizers, encouraged gatherers to say or imply that the petition would strengthen rent control to cover those not covered.

Using these tactics the anti-rent control forces obtained the necessary signatures.

At this point the council chose to rescind the ordinance. Rent control supporters decided their best course is to rewrite it and put an improved version on the ballot for the voters in 2016.

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**Bomb Trains and Coal Dust**

Richmond was originally a western railroad terminus and much of the Bay Area rail traffic goes through the city. Until the collapse of crude oil prices, it was profitable to ship Bakken crude oil by rail to refineries in the Bay Area from the shale fracking in North Dakota. In spite of the train derailment that destroyed half the downtown of Lac-Mégantic in 2013 and killed 47 people and a 50 fold spike in train oil spillage nationally, plans were in the works to ship both Bakken crude and dirty (high polluting) tar sands oil overseas through Richmond.
More than half of Richmond’s population lives within the half-mile U.S. Department of Transportation “Evacuation Zone for Oil Train Derailments.” The environmental movement mobilized against these “bomb trains.” Thanks to the Sierra Club, we also discovered the dangers of the enormous release of coal dust from open coal cars that ran through the city. As the railroads come under federal jurisdiction we had to find a variety of ways to bring pressure at the local level, including protesting the receiving companies, tightening rules at local transfers, and sit-ins to block the materials from transfer.

Chevron and Clean Air

And, we still had Chevron to deal with. The public awareness from the Chevron fire and the debate around the “modernization project” would only make a difference if we could actually get stricter rules and real enforcement from the Bay Area Air Quality Management District (BAAQMD).

The 22 District Board members are elected representatives from the 9 Bay Area Counties. Most have little independent expertise and are heavily influenced by the Board staff which has long been dominated by Chevron’s behind-the-scenes power hidden behind highly technical material. Led by Communities for a Better Environment, APEN, 350 Bay Area, and Sunflower Alliance, we kept up the pressure on a Board. This struggle has required regular mobilizations to BAAQMD hearings, mapping the political power on the Board, and visits to individual Board members. At critical times the progressive Richmond Council has added its weight to keep these issue in the public spotlight and help pressure the Board.
Budget Problems and Development

2015 also brought budget problems in Richmond. The 2012 Chevron fire meant that the company paid reduced property taxes because a big part of its refinery was not in operation. At the same time the fire resulted in a decrease or slowed increase in property values compared to the other areas in the county. In 2014, the city had to use part of its reserves to fill the gap in its budget.

Although the city’s tax base was recovering, Moody’s and Standard and Poor dropped Richmond’s bond rating which has increased the percentage rate Richmond has to pay for bonds. It also meant considerable cost to the city because the decrease in ratings triggered provisions in some of Richmond’s previous loans that could cost the city as much as $10 million.

The city has been forced to further cut spending with no money for new programs and the expansion of services needed to keep moving forward. The situation hasinclined many in the city to accept almost any project a developer puts forward because of the fees and increased taxes it would provide. Battles over development are growing.

By far the biggest development project is the plan of the University of California to build a Richmond Global Campus on land it owned in Richmond. The project, although generally welcomed by most, could super-charge the gentrification of the city. Or could it provide decent jobs and more affordable housing for current residents? That the University does not pay property taxes means that there were serious concerns about the new campus being a burden on the city. That the University was not subject to local building codes means the city has limited leverage in dealing with this project. The Raise Up Richmond coalition, led by AFSCME Local 3299, representing university employees statewide, ACCE, CCISCO, the RPA and other groups organized to try to get the University to sign a “community benefits agreement” addressing affordable housing, construction labor, job training, campus jobs, and sourcing to local businesses.

Reorganization of the RPA

Besides the rent-control and development battles, the RPA spent a good part of 2015 reorganizing itself. A large proportion of its activists were white retirees who had the time to volunteer. While we believe that we have considerable influence and responsibility in Richmond, the RPA, its leadership, events, literature, and web presence should better reflect the community we live in. There needs to be more young people and people of color at the core of the organization.

We have been taking several steps, which many see as risky gambles.

1. We set up a Restructuring Commission, made up of some of our newer activists and some non-members of the RPA who supported us but had never joined. Their charge was to figure out why key folks did not join the RPA and what we needed to do to change that. After many
meetings and interviewing many people, the commission made a long report with a range of proposals to change the culture of the organization. The Steering Committee adopted most of the proposals.

2. We have adopted new bylaws to account for our new situation and to become a real membership organization. Until this year the large RPA Steering Committee was essentially the organization – membership only meant stronger identification with the RPA. In 2013 we had begun taking building membership seriously and the new bylaws provided for membership involvement in policy making and electing the steering committee.

3. Our previous incremental attempts to broaden the culture and composition of the steering committee had not worked. When we had added younger people and people of color to the committee it was hard for them to adapt to the dominant culture and become leaders in the RPA. This time some of the older leaders of the RPA are stepping aside, not to retire but to allow space for a new leadership culture to emerge while they play an active supporting role. Based on the findings of the Restructuring Commission, a nominating committee is searching for candidates for a new leadership.

Challenges
The future of the RPA looks good. The restructuring and the building of a new and broader leadership are going well. The organization is learning from its mistakes as well as its successes. But it is continually up against the problem of resources. The one recommendation of the Restructuring Commission that the steering committee did not immediately adopt was to pay for some staff and interns. We need to raise money to make this possible and have embarked on more serious fund raising both local and national. (see for example our RootsAction appeal \url{http://act.rootsaction.org/o/6503/t/0/blastContent.jsp?email_blast_KEY=187046}).

Our success has also made us a target. Chevron not only has a well-oiled publicity machine for itself, it also attempts to fill the news void in Richmond by publishing the “Richmond Standard,” an online newspaper staffed by a professional journalist. One of Chevron’s PR firms set up and staffs the blog “Radio Free Richmond.” We can expect the realtors and the Apartment Association to heavily fund our opposition in the next election, alongside Chevron. That kind of money buys a lot of support from non-profits and attracts many middle-of-the-road wannabe politicians.

We also need to work out the relationship between RPA members elected to office and the RPA members who put them there. The RPA is a broad political/community organization with lots of disagreements. No one expects the elected officials to vote together on every question but we expect our officials to vote in accord with our basic principles. Where the RPA has adopted a position, our expectation is that the elected officials will pay close attention to what the RPA has to say and will be in dialogue with the RPA. But there are a lot of gray areas that need to be worked out. One person’s tactical issue is another person’s principle.

The RPA also has the burden of supporting officials once they are in office. The city government structure is designed to keep the council weak. Almost all city staff report to the city manager and the council is expected to deal with staff through him. The entire council has only one staff member. Councilmembers are paid about $17,000 per year so most must work regular jobs as well. They have no paid staff to represent them at meetings and events or do research. If they are not to end up relying on paid lobbyists for these functions, they need volunteers. The RPA councilmembers all have small teams of supporters with whom they meet regularly. But even so, researching issues and keeping up on many hundreds of pages of documents each week is a huge task.

Developing policy with non-professionals is more democratic and participatory than leaving it to the professionals behind closed doors, but we also make more mistakes and our openness exposes us. We have to learn how to handle issues so as not to give our enemies material to discredit us. We have supported issues that turned out to be an embarrassment simply because we did not think through their implications. Even though the issues were peripheral, our critics love to blow them up at every opportunity.

We have to find a balance between the realities of the day-to-day operation of a city and our desire to try new ideas that are “outside the box” or require fundamental changes in our society to make a breakthrough in the social problems we face. For example whenever we ask the Council to take a position on a national issue like immigration reform, we are attacked for not dealing with something we can change in Richmond.
The limits of the progress we can make locally are set by higher levels of government and by the private sector. The county had control over our hospital. Private developers mostly determine whether a project will be built. The state and federal governments make the main laws that affect the environment and rent control. The regional school district controls our schools.

The budget problems again demonstrate that the city does not have the money it needs. State law prevents the city from passing any progressive taxation and most other taxation. What the city desperately needs is a reform of Proposition 13, a state law adopted to protect homeowners but which also gives corporations millions of dollars of savings in property taxes. It actually shifts the burden to homeowners, thus stealing income from school districts and communities. Changing this law would require a statewide movement willing to mobilize thousands against the power of the corporations.

We need an independent political movement in this country, one which opposes the power of the corporations and their super-PACs and is not dependent on them as is the Democratic Party and many nonprofits. We need a movement that bases itself in community struggles, the fights against inequality, and in the organizations of working people, and environmental activists. Right now the activists in the Bernie Sanders’ campaign are shaking things up. We hope many will stick around for the longer haul in their own communities.

In other words, the progressive movement in Richmond can move forward only if such an independent progressive movement develops. Already we have made presentations to groups in other cities who are searching for an alternative to dead-end politics.

The RPA is trying to do its part.

Mike Parker is on the steering committee of the Richmond Progressive Alliance and was a candidate for Richmond Mayor in 2014 and then Campaign Coordinator for the Team Richmond campaign. He can be reached at mparker@rts-tech.com. More information on the RPA, including back issues of its newsletter, can be found at RichmondProgressiveAlliance.net. Parker is also a founding member of Labor Notes www.labornotes.org.

End Notes

2. Daniel Goodwin, Gail Eierweiss, Janet Johnson, Jeff Kilbreth, Jamin Pursel.
3. Mark Levitan, Bob Parker, Jeff Parker, Laverne Pon, Gay Semel, Jane Slaughter.