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CITY

Richmond area poised to receive nearly \$40M to improve air quality, public health

Residents at a community meeting in North Richmond weighed in on what they'd like to see the money spent on, including more parks, safer streets and cleaner air.



By Karina Ioffe

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An overhead view of the Chevron Long Wharf in Richmond on Oct. 24, 2024. Credit: Richard H. Grant

Richmond and other west Contra Costa County communities stand to receive one of the largest infusions of cash for environmental projects in local history this year, thanks to new grants from the Bay Area Air District and several other sources aimed at reducing air pollution and improving public health.

The biggest chunk of cash — nearly \$36 million — will come from a Bay Area Air District program that [reinvests penalties paid by local polluters](#) for air quality violations in communities that have been most impacted. This specific amount is from fines and settlements collected by the air district from Chevron Richmond and will be used to fund projects in Richmond, North Richmond, San Pablo, and nearby unincorporated areas, according to a [statement](#) from Contra Costa County Supervisor John Gioia, who represents west county.

Then there's \$1 million from the Contra Costa Board of Supervisors meant specifically for projects in west Contra Costa and another \$1.35 million from the federal government for a [flooding protection project in North Richmond](#).

These funds are in addition to the \$55 million per year the city of Richmond is receiving, on average, over the next 10 years from its 2024 settlement with Chevron.

“We haven't had this large amount of money at one time ever,” Gioia said. “This is a unique opportunity to make meaningful investments and improve health and economic opportunities and reduce disparities in west county.”

The air district funds will support community-led projects that reduce air pollution, improve public health and strengthen community resilience in areas that have been most impacted by air quality violations, especially those near the Chevron refinery. The grants are open to nonprofits, local governments, schools, Native American tribes, and unions that serve these impacted areas. The deadline to [apply for a grant](#) is May 29.

Residents say they want more parks and safer streets, in addition to cleaner air

Some local groups have begun gathering community feedback to help shape grant proposals. Urban Tilth, a Richmond nonprofit that runs school and community gardens and a small urban farms where it teaches residents to grow produce; The [Watershed Project](#), a local environmental organization; and Gioia's office began holding joint community meetings last month to hear from residents of North Richmond about the types of projects they want to see in their neighborhood.

They got an earful.

At a community meeting in February at Verde Elementary School, Susana Miramontes, a 20-year resident of the area, said her biggest concern was air quality. The Richmond-San Pablo area — home to 150,000 people — had “more asthma emergency room visits, higher rates of cardiovascular disease” and “lower life expectancy than in other areas of Contra Costa County,” according to a [2020 report](#) by the air quality district.

“If Richmond is not keyed into these grant opportunities, we will miss this chance at a moment when there is a lot of money available to reinvest in the community. We need to be prepared and put our best foot forward.”

— Doria Robinson, Richmond City Council member and Urban Tilth director

Although the air district grants focus on projects that will reduce pollution and improve public health, many of the residents’ concerns were rooted in everyday quality of life issues: A need for more parks where children could play safely, better lighted streets, bicycle lanes so children can ride to school safely, and stop signs to discourage speeding.

Ronald Green, who has lived in North Richmond since 2017, said that illegal dumping is the most serious problem facing his community. He spoke about a recent effort by the Contra Costa Sheriff’s

Office that placed temporary security cameras in the area, which resulted in a drop in illegal dumping.

“For two weeks, no one dumped a thing,” Green said. “There were no stolen vehicles abandoned, bags of trash or leftovers from construction sites.” But as soon as the cameras were removed, he said, the dumping resumed.

Regina Cuevas, another longtime resident of North Richmond, said she’d love to see a park with a great playground, similar to what was recently installed in [Iron Triangle’s Pogo Park](#).

“The only park we have here is Shields-Reid and there are a lot of drunks,” Cuevas said. “It’s not safe for kids to go there.”

At the meetings, North Richmond residents were asked to rank more than 100 potential projects, from an electric bike-share program to a grocery co-op in North Richmond, to “hope gardens” on street medians and an overpass over Richmond Parkway that would connect Wildcat Creek Trail with the Bay Trail. But after hearing from residents, even more ideas will be added to the list. The organizers of the February meeting will hold a final community vote March 21 to help prioritize projects.

“If Richmond is not keyed into these grant opportunities, we will miss this chance at a moment when there is a lot of money available to reinvest in the community,” said Doria Robinson, executive director of Urban Tilth and a Richmond City Council member. “We need to be prepared and put our best foot forward.”

Smaller grants target broader issues in west county; levees would combat coastal flooding

The \$1 million from the Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors is less restrictive than the air district money and is available for projects addressing health, housing, education, economic and environmental needs. Grants will be up to \$50,000 each, and groups had to apply by Feb. 27. The funding is part of a larger \$5 million grant program approved by the board in June 2025.

The \$1.35 million federal grant will go West County Wastewater to build a [“living levee,” a sloped wall made of repurposed earth](#) and native plants to protect against coastal flooding caused by extreme weather events and sea level rise, a growing problem for the area and something that’s of concern in neighborhoods with [toxic contamination](#) from decades of industrial use. The levees will be placed at various locations in North Richmond, including Point Pinole Regional Park, San Pablo Creek, West Contra Costa Landfill and Castro Cove.

The funding spree couldn’t come at a better time. Last spring, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency [suspended \\$19 million](#) in anticipated funding earmarked for the [North Richmond Community Resilience Initiative](#), a series of projects to build climate-resilient infrastructure, train locals for green jobs and environmental remediation. With the funding freeze, years of planning ground to a halt. Now, local organizations are hopeful that their many plans — that now exist in Google documents and Excel spreadsheets — will finally come to fruition.

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