

## This Election Is About Big Oil

*A city council race and a local ballot measure could end Chevron's dominance over Richmond.*

By *Robert Gammon*

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The Chevron refinery looms over the city — literally and figuratively.



Maya Sugarman

Richmond has long been a company town. Chevron has dominated city politics for decades, helping elect politicians who then have rewarded the oil giant with basically whatever it's wanted. Case in point: This summer the Richmond City Council, controlled by a group that critics call "The Chevron Five," approved the oil company's request to expand its massive oil refinery, despite protests from community activists, environmentalists, and low-income families who live downwind from the smokestacks. It was just another victory for Chevron, but on November 4, the oil company's winning streak could come to an end.

In fact, this election has turned out to be a referendum on Big Oil and its power over little Richmond. Three of The Chevron Five are up for re-election, and they're facing a tough campaign. There's also a measure on the ballot — Measure T — that would finally force Chevron to start paying for all the damage it has inflicted over the years on the city and its residents, especially the poorest, who live next to the refinery.

But the oil giant is not going down easily. Chevron and shadowy political committees with close ties to the oil company are financing an expensive campaign against Measure T, papering the city with glossy mailers claiming it will hurt small businesses — a bogus allegation. In addition, the three members of The Chevron Five who are on the ballot have been raking in campaign contributions and lining up loads of endorsements.

To understand what's happening in the Richmond election requires a quick look into local politics. In 2004, city voters approved a change to the city council that takes effect this year. The panel is being downsized from nine members to seven. The reason was simple, the nine-member council proved unwieldy, frequently resulting in marathon-long meetings. So in this election, four of the nine incumbents are up for reelection and vying for just three seats. A fifth councilmember, Tony Thurmond, a progressive who has stood up to Chevron over the years, chose not to seek reelection, and is running for the school board instead. The three winners on November 4 will join the four council members who are not on the ballot to make up the new seven-member panel.

Currently, the four not up for reelection, include two of The Chevron Five — Maria Viramontes and Ludmyrna Lopez. The other two, Mayor Gayle McLaughlin, a Green Party member, and Councilman Jim Rogers, voted against the Chevron expansion. The three members of The Chevron Five who are on the ballot are Nat Bates, John Marquez, and Harpreet Sandhu. The only other incumbent up for reelection is Tom Butt, the most consistent vote against Chevron over the past decade.

Butt, Bates, Marquez, and Sandhu face six challengers. The top three vote getters will win the election. The challengers are Jovanka Beckles, Jeff Ritterman, Courtland "Corky" Booze, Rock Brown, Navdeep Garcha, and Chris Tallerico. Two of them, Beckles, a community activist and small business owner, and Ritterman, chief of cardiology at Kaiser Richmond, are running specifically because they're outraged at the Chevron expansion and the council's approval of it. In other words, if Butt and either Beckles or Ritterman win two of the three available seats in the election, then The Chevron Five will be come The Chevron Three, and the oil company's stranglehold on Richmond politics will be over. And if Butt, Beckles, and Ritterman sweep the top three spots, then it will be a total defeat for the oil giant.

Butt looks to have a good shot at finishing in the top three. Four years ago, the popular and respected politician was the leading vote getter in the election. This time around, he has aligned himself with Beckles and Ritterman as a slate against Chevron. All three also strongly support Measure T, a tax on manufacturing that could generate up to \$26 million a year in tax revenues for the city, including about \$16 million from Chevron. The city could use the funds to lower crime, repave streets, and retrain low-income workers for the green economy. "I think this is a watershed moment," Butt said. "It's a

time that the establishment that has presided over Richmond for a long time can be broken up."

But Bates, Marquez, and Sandhu aren't giving up without a fight. Bates has been on the council for thirty years, and Marquez, for twenty-one. Sandhu was appointed to the council by a majority of its members last year to fill a vacancy, and immediately became a member of The Chevron Five. All three men also have lined up an impressive list of supporters, plus they have hauled in far more campaign contributions than Beckles and Ritterman, though Beckles is getting help from Councilman Rogers. None of these three incumbents returned phone calls seeking comment for this story.

As for Beckles and Ritterman, they both believe that local outrage over the Chevron expansion vote will help them battle their well-heeled opponents. Environmentalists had opposed the expansion because it could allow Chevron to start refining heavier, dirtier grades of crude, possibly increasing toxic emissions over the city. Richmond residents became particularly enraged when they learned that The Chevron Five had negotiated a secret \$10 million "community benefits agreement" with the oil company before the council approved the expansion in a 5-4 vote. "It was a just a huge disrespect for openness and transparency in government," Beckles said. "It was a closed deal that didn't include public input."

Then after the vote, the council majority — i.e. The Chevron Five — appointed Bates, Marquez, and Sandhu to a panel that would decide how to dole out the \$10 million and to whom. Opponents immediately cried foul, noting that it would allow Bates, Marquez, and Sandhu to promise expensive favors and secure support while running for reelection. "It was such a transparently unethical thing to do," Ritterman said. "The idea that you would meet secretly with an oil company and you end up with an agreement that lets you buy votes, it was the epitome of unethical behavior." The council eventually was forced to rescind its decision to put Bates, Marquez, and Sandhu on the panel.

Beckles also pointed to a July survey showing that residents are not particularly happy about being a company town. The survey by David Binder Research found that 54 percent said Chevron and its refinery have contributed negatively to their quality of life compared to 33 percent who viewed the impact positively. Moreover, 73 percent said they wanted the council to delay the approval of the refinery expansion until the full impacts of refining heavier, dirtier crude could be examined.

But does that mean Beckles and Ritterman can win? It's unclear, because there have been no polls published that show whether voters realize that Bates, Marquez, and Sandhu are responsible for the refinery expansion going forward. Instead, they have been bombarded with mailers, touting the incumbents' endorsements and Democratic Party support. Bates has even attempted to align himself with Barack Obama, producing mailers with Obama's picture next to his, implying that he too is the candidate for change despite his three decades of supporting Chevron.

# **Vote** Ritterman, Beckles, Butt for Richmond City Council

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