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GREENING RICHMOND

THE MAYOR AND AN ANGRY COMMUNITY FIGHT TO SAVE THEIR WATERFRONT

July 22, 2007



HOME: LOFT MENTALITY

TRAVEL: FESTIVE VANGOUVER

FOOD: NAPA BARBECUE





Above: The Port of Richmond, above, and Whitney Dotson (left) with his grandchildren Ade-Ajai and Jordan on a walk through the Breuner Property and marsh.

RECLAIMING RICHMOND

The city's Green Party Mayor Gayle McLaughlin and a cadre of residents fight to take back the shoreline for public use

BY TIM HOLT • PHOTOGRAPHS BY KAT WADE

Whitney Dotson knows where the wild mustard greens grow along Richmond's shoreline. Near this same spot during the Christmas season, he marvels at the sight of tens of thousands of waterfowl, pausing to rest on their flight along the Great Pacific Flyway.

Dotson, 62, his face framed by graying dreadlocks, has the sunny disposition of a born optimist. And he has a vision for his hometown's future, one that would embrace and preserve most of the green shoreline of this industrial city.

Growing up in a place like Richmond can sharpen your appreciation for such things as green spaces and wildlife.

Dotson spent his earliest years in Richmond's notorious Seaport Apartments, low-

cost housing built toward the end of World War II to house shipyard workers. His family had moved from Louisiana so his father could work in the Richmond shipyards. The apartments were right next to a pesticide and chemical plant. Dotson and the other kids from the apartments skimmed rocks on nearby ponds and waded through marshes laden with toxic waste. There was often a putrid, rotten-egg smell coming from the plant, and a mysterious brown dust would settle on the cars around the apartments.

Two of Dotson's sisters, one now deceased, have been diagnosed with cancer. Dotson himself seems to have come through unscathed; his biggest health complaint is that his feet swell up on long plane flights.

When he was 5, Dotson's family moved into what he calls the first black subdivision



Above: sunset on the stacks at Chevron from Nicol Knob Trail in Point Richmond; right, Mike Elwell takes his dog, Whitey, on a romp on the trail.

in California, Parchester Village, fronting Richmond Bay. He still lives there, in his boyhood home. A son, Lukman, lives with his family just down the street.

Parchester Village is a mixture of African American and Latino residents these days. It is no longer the quiet suburban oasis it once was. The village experienced two murders last year in a city with a total of 42, a city where dead bodies are occasionally dumped in local parks, and where residents are careful to get behind locked doors when the sun goes down.

That's the Richmond most of us know from news reports, but something else is going on in this city. Thanks to the efforts of people like Dotson, Richmond is spawning its own brand of environmentalism: a push

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for a greener shoreline, a greener city and green businesses in a city that has long been a toxic dumping ground. It is a hardscrabble kind of environmentalism, this push for a greener city amid Richmond's wrecking yards, its chemical ponds and its huge refinery. This effort goes back at least to the 1970s, and the beginnings of the modern environmental movement in the country at large, when Richmond's two major shoreline parks

were established. Where else but in Richmond would you find a sprawling shoreline park, Point Pinole, situated on the former site of a manufacturer of gunpowder and blasting caps? Richmond's other shoreline park, Miller-Knox, replaced chemical plants and a quarry operation.

Richmond is a city where environmentalism is no abstract concept, where the idea of a clean environment takes on a certain urgency. Richmond's children are hospitalized for asthma at twice the rate of children in the rest of Contra Costa County, according to county health records. In 1993, 21,000 sought medical attention for respiratory problems after concentrated sulfuric acid leaked into the atmosphere from a faulty tank car valve at the General Chemical plant. The city is

home to one of the Bay Area's worst toxic sites, the former pesticide plant in Dotson's old neighborhood, still laden with a witches' brew that includes sulfuric acid, DDT, mercury, zinc and arsenic.

"We haven't always been as big on the environment as we are now," says longtime Richmond Councilman Tom Butt notes in something of an understatement. "In the past the environmental movement was seen as something only people of means could indulge in, an attitude here in Richmond that we're poor, we need jobs, the environment can come later."

For a long time, activists like Dotson and the late Lucretia Edwards, a famous fighter







Whitney Dotson, (left) chair of the North Richmond Shoreline Open Space Alliance, Richmond Mayor Gayle McLaughlin and Professor Robin Freeman, also with the alliance, discuss plans to open up more of the Richmond shoreline to the public.

for shoreline parks in Richmond, labored in a kind of vacuum, with little support from local government.

"But that's changing," Butt notes. "New people are moving here from Marin and San Francisco and Oakland. They're part of an emerging constituency that's pushing for green issues and growing increasingly effective. We're starting to get it, to make the connection between a healthy environment and long-term economic development."

In November this green-leaning constituency helped elect Councilwoman Gayle McLaughlin as the city's first Green Party mayor.

Some of the efforts to green Richmond have been in the works for a while: Whitney Dotson's vision for his hometown is in part a legacy from his father, the Rev. Richard Daniel Dotson. A contingent from Parchester Village, led by Dotson and determined to

preserve the marshes around the subdivision, fought off proposals in the 1970s to replace them with a small airport, bringing in the Sierra Club as an ally and ultimately paving the way for the establishment of Point Pinole Park.

The reverend's son is now the leading spokesman for a coalition of community groups and Bay Area environmental organizations, including the Sierra Club, that hope to preserve nearly three-fourths of the city's 32-mile-long shoreline. Point Pinole park has already instituted eminent domain proceedings and is set to absorb the 36-acre Breuner Marsh at the park's southern boundary. Next, Dotson's group is targeting an expanse of meadowland west and south of Parchester Village known as the Crescent, the very place where Dotson finds his wild greens.

The idea of opening up most of Richmond's shoreline for public recreation may

seem a little far-fetched for a city whose shoreline has long been dominated by commerce, principally the Chevron oil refinery and the city's deepwater port. But consider this: A city that had only 30 feet of open shoreline as recently as the 1960s now has 9 miles. Richmond can already boast 24.5 miles of completed Bay Trail, by far the longest stretch in any Bay Area city. (The Bay Trail, when completed, will ring San Francisco and San Pablo bays with 500 miles of pathways for hikers and cyclists.) Rich Walking of the Natural Heritage Institute in San Francisco, an ally of Dotson's, has been investigating potential parkland acquisitions along Richmond's north shoreline. He believes it's feasible to open up half of Richmond's shoreline within the next two decades. And, like Dotson, he wants to start with the marshes around Parchester Village. Walking is hoping that funds from the re-

cently approved state park bonds measure, Proposition 84, can be used to acquire them in the near future because, as he points out, there are other proposals on the table for housing and light industrial development on these same shoreline parcels.

With little fanfare until recently, Richmond has been attracting green businesses. The lure has been an abundance of inexpensive industrial space — inexpensive at least by Bay Area standards — and the proximity to the sophisticated shipping infrastructure that is part of Richmond's industrial legacy: two major rail lines, a deepwater port and nearby interstate freeways. New, green businesses outgrowing their startup sites have found a home in Richmond.

"Richmond's one of the few places left in the Bay Area that's supportive of manufacturing," notes James Sheppard, president of a company that makes countertops from recycled glass. "Berkeley, where we came from, seems to be trying to convert everything to high-end condos."

Sheppard's company, Vetrazzo, moved into the historic 520,000-square-foot plant where the Ford Motor Co. once built cars and where a legion of Rosie the Riveters put the finishing touches on tanks bound for the Pacific during World War II. Sheppard's company will soon have a new neighbor, PowerLight, another Berkeley startup, which installs solar power systems all over the world.

Sheppard plans to start running his operation entirely on solar power once his new neighbor arrives in October. The company already ships its countertops via a small fleet of biodiesel-powered trucks owned by another Richmond operation, Blue Sky Trucking.

The greening of Richmond reached a kind of crescendo in November, when Richmond voters elected their Green Party mayor. The candidacy of McLaughlin, who moved to Richmond seven years ago, no doubt benefited from the fact that her two principal opponents were African Americans who split the vote of that constituency. Gary Bell, a former City Council member and mortgage broker, had already failed to get re-elected to the council in 2004. McLaughlin's other main opponent, incumbent Mayor Irma Anderson, was perceived by many voters as well intentioned but ineffective. And she provided the perfect foil for McLaughlin's low-budget, populist campaign: Anderson was supported by the city's business establishment, while McLaughlin refused to accept corporate donations and was the target of numerous hit pieces financed (via PACs) by Chevron and

the Council of Industries, Richmond's leading business organization.

McLaughlin was a vocal supporter of Measure T, a municipal industrial tax, on the same November ballot. The tax, opposed by Anderson, would have raised millions from Chevron for the city's coffers.

McLaughlin defeated Anderson by fewer than 300 votes but spent only \$28,000 to Anderson's \$110,000.

An even bigger surprise was McLaughlin's election to the City Council back in 2004. Running a similar low-budget campaign, she came in third in a field of 15 candidates for four at-large seats on the council. It was the first dramatic sign that Richmond's politics were shifting in a new direction.

A Green Party member and former anti-war activist from Chicago might seem like an odd fit for Richmond, but the Green Party label is a little misleading. McLaughlin comes from working-class roots; her father was a carpenter, and the family lived in a blue-collar neighborhood. Her announced intention as mayor of making Richmond "the green industrial capital of the Bay Area" is probably more than just a slogan: She understands the importance of manufacturing and industrial jobs for working-class families — and, in a city with Richmond's environmental history, the health benefits that go with them.

And, despite her party label, she's not exactly an environmental firebrand. In general she comes across as something rare in politics: a gentle, nurturing sort — except when she gets on the subject of corporate influence in politics. Her principal role at present seems to be that of a spirited cheerleader for Richmond's burgeoning environmental and progressive movement. "The tent I'm building is a big one," she says.

By her election to the city's highest office, she has become the symbol, the figurehead, for Richmond's new green direction. And her personality — friendly, warm and open — may be just what's needed to nurture grassroots efforts, like Dotson's, that are already well advanced. The mayor has already pledged to make his and Walkling's vision of an expanded shoreline park part of the city's new general plan.

She's also doing some cheerleading for

green businesses, getting the council to pass a resolution declaring Richmond a "green business development zone." It's not clear precisely what that means; her aides are working on a follow-up initiative that is supposed to provide additional incentives for green businesses to move to the city.

And McLaughlin is using her new bully pulpit to keep nudging Richmond away from its historic attitude, reinforced during the lean post-World War II years, that it can't do anything to rattle its industrial base, notably Chevron. In taking on the city's largest employer, McLaughlin harks back to her rabble-rousing anti-war days in Chicago, and she seems to sincerely believe that a revival of the grassroots activism that blossomed in the '60s and '70s is possible today in Richmond.

"There's an old saying here, that Richmond's a plantation, and Chevron's the plan-

"If it's a matter of serious economic concern to Chevron, they're going to get their way. Everyone knows that taking on Chevron jeopardizes your chances of getting re-elected to the council or of running successfully for higher office."

Political activist Juan Reardon

tation owner," Councilman Butt says with a chuckle. McLaughlin seems to think the plantation is ripe for rebellion. Butt, a political ally, agrees: "For the first time in a century," he observes, "the City Council is starting to stand up to Chevron."

Last year, before the mayoral election, McLaughlin helped persuade the council to rescind the longtime practice of allowing Chevron to self-inspect and self-permit its own projects. She describes Richmond as a city "which has suffered from decades of oil industry pollution" and promises that the city will carefully scrutinize Chevron's latest proposed refinery modifications, designed to allow the company to process the dirtier crude oil that's being dredged from the world's depleting oil reserves.

Not everyone is convinced that the current City Council is ready to confront Chevron on this new project, despite the mayor's determination to do so. "If it's a matter of se-

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rious economic concern to Chevron, they're going to get their way," claims longtime political activist Juan Reardon, who managed both of McLaughlin's campaigns. "Everyone knows that taking on Chevron jeopardizes your chances of getting re-elected to the council or of running successfully for higher office."

"That kind of statement really impugns the integrity of the council," responds Chevron spokesman Dean O'Hair. "If we ran the council the way some people say we do, it wouldn't be taking us three years to get a permit for this latest project."

Last year, with Mayor Anderson dissenting, the council voted to put a proposal on the ballot for a special tax on all Richmond industries that process raw materials. The tax would have brought in \$8.5 million to city coffers, \$8 million of that from Chevron.

"They make that much in an hour," says McLaughlin with a chuckle. The proposed Measure T went down to defeat on the same ballot that put McLaughlin in the top spot, but she vows to try again, hoping that the money raised from the tax can be used to fund employment and job training programs for kids from low-income families, part of her "social justice" platform.

McLaughlin is still scrambling for funds, but she hopes to establish a Richmond Youth Corps program that would employ 1,000 at-risk kids year-round to restore creeks, repair roads and help in libraries. She has already managed to boost the city's summer jobs program for youth from 290 positions last year to 350 this year.

And the new mayor is also seeking funds for a crime-prevention program that would send "peacekeeping teams" with mediation skills into crime-ridden neighborhoods. The teams would provide links on a case-by-case basis to substance abuse, mental health, vocational training and other government assistance programs.

Despite Reardon's doubts, the current City Council at times seems downright eager to play hardball with Chevron. It recently authorized the



Canada geese in the pond at Miller/Knox Regional Shoreline Park.

new mayor to ask the State Lands Commission to refuse to renew Chevron's lease on state-owned lands underneath the oil company's Richmond wharf operation — where it receives its crude oil — unless Chevron stops blocking completion of the last remaining gap in the Bay Trail, which is on Chevron property.

"I'm surprised and disappointed Chevron isn't cooperating to finish the trail," says Bruce Beyaert, a Richmond resident and volunteer who's been coordinating development of Richmond's portion of the trail. "After all, they've got plenty of competent people who should be able to figure out a way to close the gap." Beyaert should know. He was an executive in Chevron's San Francisco office for 33 years, retiring in 1992.

The company has cited security and safety concerns as reasons for blocking the trail through its refinery operation, currently sending cyclists on an alternative route that skirts a busy stretch of freeway. However, in a recent interview, O'Hair said the company is willing to re-evaluate both routes.

An almost-completed Bay Trail, the push for a greener shoreline and an influx of green businesses provide high-profile evidence of Richmond's new green direction, but evidence of Richmond's greening is popping up all over the city: near the center of town, a new bicycle and pedestrian "greenway" on an old railroad right-of-way; just south of the Iron Tri-

gle, a planned "greening" of Nystrom Elementary School, complete with native plants sprouting from its roof; four new pocket parks along the shoreline.

Councilman Butt, another die-hard optimist, believes that Richmond "is coming into its own as a waterfront city." He points out that until the post-World War II years, Richmond thrived in that role, first as a waterfront industrial center, home to Ford's first auto assembly plant on the West Coast, then with the booming shipyards and war industries of World War II.

"Look, Richmond's never going to be a great city," he admits, "but we can certainly develop our own identity as something other than another suburb of San Francisco."

Butt is convinced that the key to this lies in Richmond's 32-mile-long waterfront and the current drive to open more of that for public use, as well as a gradual transition from heavy industry to cleaner and greener manufacturing, as represented by the new occupants of the city's historic Ford plant.

And that's just fine with Whitney Dotson, if it means that future generations will have a protected green shoreline to explore near Parchester Village and that weary travelers are assured a permanent rest stop along the Great Pacific Flyway.

Tim Holt is an environmental writer and the author of "Songs of the Simple Life," a collection of essays.

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