



Application Form submitted by the initiative to participate in the Transformative Cities People's Choice Award

GENERAL INFORMATION	
Location:	Richmond, CA. USA
Title of the Transformative Initiative:	Transforming a century-old, oil company town.
Name of organization:	Richmond Progressive Alliance (RPA)
Type of organization:	RPA is a multi-issue, multi-racial, working class-oriented, municipal reform organization that runs candidates for public office and organizes local campaigns for economic justice and environmental protection.
Website:	http://www.richmondprogressivealliance.net/
Category and Edition:	ENERGY. Transformative Cities Award 1st edition (2018).
STORYTELLING	
Summary	
RPA has made Richmond a national model, in the U.S. for successful independent political action outside the Democratic Party. It has organized the community to challenge a global energy giant which has long polluted the city's air, water, and local politics.	
Context and problem definition	
Richmond is a blue-collar city of 110,000, just up the coast from Oakland and Berkeley, CA and across the bay from San Francisco. It is 80 percent non-white. About 40 percent of its population is Latino, 30 percent African American, and 10 percent Asian. Nearly one-fifth of its families live at or near the poverty line. It has the lowest median income of 101 cities in the nine-county Bay Area and Latino family income is about \$5,000 a year less than that citywide figure.	

Richmond was a “company town” for more than a century. Its municipal government was long dominated by the global energy giant Chevron, local manufacturing interests, landlords and developers, and their conservative building trades and police union allies. Richmond’s landscape was scarred and its air fouled by one of the largest oil refineries in California. De-industrialization, joblessness and poverty, substandard schools and housing, drug trafficking, street crime, and gang violence all contributed to one of the highest local homicide rates per capita in the country, just 12 years ago.

In 2013, cronyism and corruption in city hall led to financial mismanagement and near municipal bankruptcy. Richmond was forced to make big cuts in city jobs and essential services. Relations between the Richmond Police Department (RPD) and an 80% non-white community were extremely hostile, due to officer-involved shootings and beatings, harassment of day laborers and homeless people, and police checkpoints set up to detain immigrant drivers without documentation, in a city with a growing Latino population.

Design and Initiation

The RPA is simultaneously an electoral formation, a membership organization, a coalition of community groups, and a key coordinator of grassroots education and citizen mobilization around multiple issues. Unusual in the fractious and marginalized US left, the group unites liberal Democrats, socialists, independents, and third-party voters affiliated with the California Greens or Peace and Freedom Party.

RPA candidates have distinguished themselves locally by their refusal to accept business donations, while welcoming the support of progressive unions. The Alliance relies on membership dues, door-to-door canvassing to expand its grassroots base, and, in election years, small individual donors and modest public matching funds for its city council and mayoral candidates. RPA work with labor and community allies has created strong synergy between activist city hall leadership and grassroots organizing.

One of the early challenges of building Richmond’s Progressive Alliance, more than a decade ago, was getting people concerned about diverse issues, to work together around a common agenda for municipal reform. There were local activists protesting police brutality, who even then were concerned about housing affordability and immigrant rights, who wanted to raise the minimum wage, clean up the environment, and get Chevron to pay more in property taxes. But they were working on single-issue campaigns or in more narrowly focused organizations, in the usual fragmented fashion.



RPA's organizational success flowed from getting people to come together, adopt a common platform, run candidates (who refuse all corporate donations), and who will remain accountable to the constituencies that elected them. Once elected, RPA candidates have used their position as mayor or city councilor to help mobilize the community to counter the enormous political influence of Chevron and other special interests.

The Richmond Progressive Alliance is an unusual hybrid organization. It has about 300 dues-paying members. It has some labor and community organizational partners. It doesn't just pop up every two or four years at election time. It organizes, all the time, around issues involving labor, immigrant rights, environmental justice, housing affordability, police accountability, fair taxation of business, community health, and environmental protection.

Implementation

From 2006 to 2014, Richmond was the largest U.S. city with a Green mayor, Gayle McLaughlin a founder of the RPA. While she was mayor, the city tackled environmental hazards arising from oil refining and crude-by-rail shipment through the city's extensive railroad network. Richmond extracted higher taxes from Chevron and sued the giant oil company over damage caused by a major refinery fire in 2012. On the first anniversary of that fire, McLaughlin led a march of 2,500 people to the Richmond refinery gates and several hundred were arrested in peace civil disobedience.

A community mobilization led by environmental justice groups and the RPA helped Richmond win \$90 million in financial concessions from Chevron in return for approving a refinery modernization project that will improve safety and reduce pollution. Richmond residents joined coalitions fighting global warming, and cross-border alliances formed in response to Big Oil's worldwide misbehavior.

As mayor, McLaughlin traveled to Ecuador, as guest of President Rafael Correa, to forge relationships of solidarity with peasant farmers suing Chevron for environmental damage. More than 85% of Richmond utility users have reduced their dependence on fossil fuel by choosing Marin Clean Energy as their renewal energy provider, an option available to Pacific Gas and Electric customers through a regional program called "community choice aggregation."

Richmond has also raised its local minimum wage and defeated a major development scheme based on casino gambling. Richmond became one of the first municipalities in the U.S. to declare itself a "sanctuary city," that refuses to cooperate with federal immigration

officials. The city also created a municipal ID card to aid its undocumented residents. A Richmond city council majority also enacted a “ban the box” ordinance to ease the reentry of former prisoners into the community by curbing discrimination against job applicants with a criminal record.

At a time when many cities have been wracked by violent crime and abusive police officers, progressive leaders in Richmond hired a visionary gay police chief, who greatly reduced local crime rates, including homicides, through successful community policing. (See attached link below to Washington Monthly report for more on that.)

Results achieved and Evaluation

In the last three election cycles (2012, 2014, and 2016), Chevron, its right-wing union allies - and other big business interests like the landlord lobby -- spent more than \$7 million trying to elect corporate-friendly candidates. They attacked and tried to defeat activists committed to making their city safer, cleaner, greener and more equitable for all its residents.

Thanks to their year-round, non-electoral organizing work, candidates fielded by the Richmond Progressive Alliance (RPA) have won 10 out of the 16 municipal races they have entered since 2004. The RPA now has a progressive "super-majority" (of five out of seven city council members) and is affiliated with Our Revolution, a national network of Bernie Sanders supporters now engaged in local politics in other cities. All RPA city councilors today are people of color and two are in their mid-twenties.

RPA organizing (and resulting changes in municipal government) have produced high levels of citizen engagement. Today, progressive activists populate an array of Richmond city commissions, departments, and programs dealing with public safety, city planning, job creation, shoreline preservation, urban agriculture, parks and recreation, and the arts.

Voter alienation and estrangement from local politics has been greatly reduced, as a result. Semi-annual polling by the National Research Center, during the eight-year period between 2007 and 2015, show broad community agreement that Richmond has made substantial progress. Residents surveyed believe that the city has improved, often dramatically, by each metric used: overall quality of life and image, community characteristics (whether it is a good place to work, live, or raise children), governance (including services like public safety and street repair), and, last but not least, sense of community.

Richmond's changing demographics has produced a new generation of progressive elected officials who were committed to democratizing and revitalizing the city. Richmond's innovative policies and programs are now being reproduced elsewhere. Most copied is the city's Office of Neighborhood Safety, a program to reduce gun violence and get gang members enrolled in a "Peace Keeper Fellowship," which provides them with income support, job training and employment, educational opportunities, and counseling.

Political Strategies

Strategies to counter influence of Big Oil strategies have included legal, political, popular mobilization, and cross-border solidarity.

Under a visionary mayor, Richmond city hall has promoted much-needed public policy experiments, even though some were stalled or failed, due to lack of funding or sufficient governmental authority.

Richmond's exemplary mix of electoral campaigning around issues and candidates, principled and persistent follow-up by elected officials, and some skilled professional city managing have made it a model for municipal action on behalf of people poorly served by local government in the past.

What activists have going for them at the city level—an advantage almost nonexistent in the big-money-dominated realms of state or national politics—is greater personal connection to voters. Forging what Gayle McLaughlin calls authentic relationships isn't a spontaneous process, however. It takes time, organization, and systematic outreach around issues that affect peoples' daily lives.

In all its local forms, civic engagement helps create personal connections and community solidarity. In successive electoral campaigns, these have become the great equalizer in Richmond. Dedicated political volunteering has facilitated face-to-face contact and one-on-one conversations with thousands of people. And, in most election years, the grass-roots mobilization capacity of the local left has been able to neutralize the usual advantages enjoyed by corporate adversaries with overall campaign budgets fifteen or thirty times larger. Counterintuitive as it may be, "going local"-- in the short term--may be the most effective individual and collective response to economic challenges and environmental threats that remain dauntingly national and global in scope.

Related legislations

Richmond has been a national leader in the fight to keep housing affordable for renters and homeowners who are poor and working class. In 2012, the city had 900 foreclosures. By the end of 2013, 50 percent of its homeowners were still saddled with underwater mortgages, and many owed an amount twice the current value of their property. Foreclosures were forcing poor and working-class families out of their homes, often leaving vacant dwellings behind, which led to neighborhood blight and further depression of local property values. By a 4-to-3 margin, the city council majority voted to use the threat of eminent domain to force mortgage lenders to renegotiate the terms of their housing loans. (Actual use of Richmond's eminent domain powers required a council "super majority" of five, which progressives did not have until earlier this year.)

Big mortgage holders, like Wells Fargo, Bank of New York Mellon and Deutsche Bank, mobilized quickly to prevent this dangerous idea from spreading. Their PR and legal counter-attack campaign scared away much-needed allies on the city councils of neighboring communities. In late 2014 President Barack Obama, a corporate Democrat, further undermined Richmond's anti-foreclosure strategy by signing legislation forbidding any federal role in mortgage financing of homes taken by eminent domain.

Door-to-door canvassing among Richmond's many financially distressed homeowners did lead to a successful campaign for tenant protection. On November 8, 2016, Richmond voters approved rent regulation by a two-to-one margin, after heavy landlord and real estate industry spending to defeat this ballot measure.

Rent control now protects about 40% of all Richmond tenants (rather than all because of restrictions on local rent control ordinances imposed by the California legislature.) Local rent payments were rolled back to 2015 levels. Future rent hikes will be tied to overall increases in the cost of living and commercial landlords will not be able to evict tenants without "just cause" -- a firewall, for now, against displacement of poor and working class people in Richmond threatened by broader Bay Area gentrification trends.

Richmond is one of the first cities in California to enact rent control in the last 30 years. This is a tremendous breakthrough, a real economic gain, and, a model for what affordable housing activists can do elsewhere.

Lessons learned

The struggle to revitalize and democratize Richmond is part of a larger municipal reform trend, which emerged during a period of political deadlock at the state and federal level during the Obama Administration.

Under Donald Trump, we've gone from bad to worse in the U.S., forcing "rebel city" leaders to deploy the limited resources of local government to fight poverty, inequality, and environmental degradation because government at higher levels is failing to address such problems or making them worse.

In other countries, there is a similar trend of "going local" in politics—for example, the recent election of female mayors and city council members committed to direct citizen participation in Barcelona and Madrid.

In electoral politics in the U.S., those with the most donor clout—what Senator Bernie Sanders calls "the billionaire class"—are normally well positioned to win, whether their preferred candidate comes in first or second, like in our 2016 presidential election.

The success of current "resistance" to Trump depends on building a stronger grass-roots base in local politics, labor organizing, and social movement building. "What we need," Sanders argues, "is a 50-state strategy, which engages people—young and working class people—to stand up and run for school board, to run for city council, and the state legislature, so government, at all levels, starts listening to ordinary people instead of campaign contributors."

"Taking over city hall in Richmond or any other city won't, by itself, keep big money out of politics," Sanders points out. "It can't stop climate change, eliminate economic injustice and racism, or stop all law enforcement abuses. Addressing those problems requires broader movement building, national and global in scale. But local progress is still possible wherever we have government that represents all of us, not just the 1 percent."

EXTRA INFO

Supporting documents

<http://www.thenation.com/article/179949/can-big-oil-retake-richmond-california>

<http://www.counterpunch.org/2017/04/12/the-promises-and-limitations-of-radical-local-politics/>

<https://washingtonmonthly.com/magazine/novemberdecember-2016/top-cop/>

Sharing Our Experience: Video on RPA <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EO-HjzEIn2c0>

<https://ww2.kqed.org/forum/2017/03/08/steve-early-on-richmonds-political-transformation/>