

A VISION OF HEALTHY COMMUNITIES

What is your vision for healthy communities in West Contra Costa County?

The West County Indicators Project was launched in 2006 to discover community answers to this question and to work with local residents and organizations to build power to achieve this vision. Their bottom line: a healthy community requires environmental and economic justice. With environmental justice, residents of Richmond, North Richmond, and San Pablo live in a healthy and safe community regardless of their race, nationality, or economic status. Economic justice ensures that each resident has access to a meaningful livelihood and that each neighborhood has the resources it needs for its residents to thrive.

Underlying the entire project is the idea that research owned and controlled by neighborhood residents can help build powerful movements for social change. The unifying power of hands-on research on neighborhood concerns builds connections and successes across issues like good jobs, air quality, youth opportunities, park conditions, street lights, and housing quality, and it holds the power to help unify diverse communities.

WEST COUNTY: A SNAPSHOT

This neighborhood indicators project focuses on the westernmost communities of Contra Costa County and the City of Richmond, including North Richmond, Parchester Village, Iron Triangle, Atchison Village, Santa Fe, Coronado, Belding Woods, Shields-Reid, and West San Pablo. These culturally and economically diverse neighborhoods are home to approximately 47,000 residents, 90% of whom are people of color, with a median household income of \$32,000 according to the 2000 Census. Their neighborhoods hold a wide range of treasures including extensive and deep-rooted community social networks, strong leaders, broad-based support for the arts, athletic legacies, a gorgeous natural environment and excellent climate, an extensive shoreline, small locally owned businesses, and a rich history reflecting the accomplishments of workers and residents from all walks of life.¹

These neighborhoods also struggle with many economic, social, and environmental challenges. High unemployment and school drop-out rates have contributed to financial hardship for many families. Crime, violence, illegal dumping, and neglected public parks disrupt the otherwise strong social fabric. West County is also home to several sources of environmental pollution, which have considerable cumulative negative health impacts, including General Chemical, the Chevron Refinery, the Port of Richmond, two rail yards, an older, possibly lead-contaminated housing stock, and several abandoned brownfield sites.²

The environmental health risks created by industrial activity are concentrated in West County's communities

of color, although these neighborhoods reap relatively few of the benefits, such as good jobs. This legacy of racial inequity is an historical pattern that is common to urban communities across the United States. Since before World War II, African-American Richmondites were restricted to living in areas viewed as less desirable, often because of the area's proximity to industrial activity. Such segregation contributed to economic decline and subsequent depressed housing prices in these neighborhoods, leaving them the only affordable areas for many incoming immigrants. As a consequence, many people of color have been relegated to the areas where the greatest concentration of heavy industry and pollution sources is located.

The concentration of environmental hazards and lack of economic assets in the West County neighborhoods where black, Latino, and Asian-American residents have lived and continue to live can seem overwhelming, yet there is also a strong tradition of community organizing and advocacy that has played a crucial role in creating thriving, healthy neighborhoods. One of the rationales behind embarking on the West County Indicators Project was to produce research that breaks down neighborhood challenges into specific indicators the community can focus on changing through organizing, advocacy, and targeted service-provision.

The West County Indicators Project is comprised of three major elements: **research** on priority issues, **relationship- and capacity-building**, and (planning for and taking) **action**.

THE POWER IS IN THE PROCESS: THE STORY OF THE WEST COUNTY INDICATORS PROJECT

The Roots

The Indicators Project was initiated by four West County community leaders: Dr. Henry Clark of the West County Toxics Coalition, Lee Jones and Jannat Muhammad of the Neighborhood House of North Richmond, and Johnny White of the Community Health Initiative. The project was modeled on the successful West Oakland Environmental Indicators Project of the Pacific Institute, which highlighted the connections between the root causes of multiple social, environmental, and economic issues to create powerful collaborations and innovative, effective organizing strategies.

The West County Indicators Project was launched in 2006 with a series of workshops and outreach to community-based organizations, parent groups, churches, neighborhood councils, and elected officials in Richmond, North Richmond, and San Pablo to identify priority issues to be

addressed. During this outreach we also invited organizations and individuals who were interested in being more involved in the project to join a Steering Committee to help plan and conduct both research and capacity-building workshops. The Steering Committee helped ensure that the Indicators project met its goals of being accountable to a wide range of neighborhoods, issues, and types of organizations (from service providers to organizing and advocacy groups). The organizations who anchored the Steering Committee were: West County Toxics Coalition, Contra Costa Interfaith Supporting Community Organization (CCISCO), Neighborhood House of North Richmond, Historic Triangle Neighborhood Council, Morada de Mujeres del Milenio, North Richmond Shoreline Open Space Alliance (NRSOSA), Pacific Institute, and the Richmond Progressive Alliance.

Selecting Issues and Indicators

What is a neighborhood indicator?

An indicator is a measurement or a piece of information that tells us something about a larger system. For example, the temperature on a thermometer is an indicator of a person's health. Similarly, neighborhood indicators tell us something about our local community. Indicators can be tracked over time to see if neighborhood conditions are improving or getting worse, or can be compared across neighborhoods to highlight inequalities. Indicators also reflect the values and hopes residents have for their communities, and provide concrete data that support actions to improve community health and help measure progress toward a shared vision.

Identifying the issues

Early meetings of the Steering Committee focused on identifying which issues would be the focus of our collective research. In selecting issues, we asked:

- Does this issue affect many people? Is it widely and deeply felt?

- Do we know people in the community working on this issue? If not, are there people who want to work on it?
- Does this issue contain equity and justice concerns? Can action on this issue build power to address those concerns?
- Can action on this issue build relationships and unite people across the project area?

With an initial list of 16, we ultimately selected the 11 issues you see in this report based on whether we could find or develop useful, accessible data for the issue. We then identified specific indicators for each issue that were:

- Measurable, consistent, and reliable
- Relevant to community concerns and to policy and advocacy
- Exciting, interesting, and compelling
- Focused on causes, not symptoms
- Illustrative of equity and justice concerns

Research and Capacity-Building

Once issues and their respective indicators were developed, we began conducting two types of research. We completed “secondary” research on indicators for which data already existed but was not accessible at a neighborhood scale. Pacific Institute researchers located, collected, and analyzed data from city, county, state, and national agencies, and presented these at the neighborhood level when possible, and at the city level otherwise.

For three of the issues for which no data existed, we completed “primary” research, during which we generated new information about neighborhood conditions through participatory research projects led by various Steering Committee member organizations. These projects included an audit of the condition of area parks by youth from Neighborhood House of North Richmond, surveys completed by Contra Costa Interfaith Supporting Community Organization (CCISCO) on the perception of streetlight improvements around the Lucas Park section of the Iron Triangle, and surveys by CCISCO on the availability of youth programs for young people in Richmond. See the introduction to the participatory research chapters on page 82 for more details.

Project research was not limited to indicator data. Oral histories document the memories of community residents, providing insight into the complex ways different issues intersect and affect people. Surveys were used to document and show patterns in the lived experiences of residents of different communities. Maps created by community members document and display where resources or problems are concentrated in a community. Photographs taken by community residents produce irreplaceable visual images that anchor and complement numerical data and other types of information. In carrying out the Indicators Project research, we integrated these research tools to comprehensively document neighborhood challenges and inequities, and to provide insight into the human cost and the potential solutions.

While conducting this research, the Indicators Project also worked to build the capacity of West County organizations to effectively integrate research into their service provision, organizing, or advocacy efforts. For example, we hosted a workshop on “Tools for Community Based Research” that focused on participatory action research tools as an effective way of building community leadership.

Action Planning/Looking Forward

As the research for each issue approached completion in 2008, Steering Committee members identified and acted on near-term opportunities for using the research findings to strengthen community action on the issues of refinery flaring, streetlights, park conditions, access to shoreline open space, and tax revenue. The partners also engaged in longer-term planning for building momentum on these and other issues, including lead contamination in homes, resources for formerly incarcerated individuals, and youth programs.

We are also communicating our findings to reach multiple audiences through fact sheets for individual issues, presentations at community meetings, teach-ins, meetings with elected officials, and other actions planned by those organizing on specific issues.

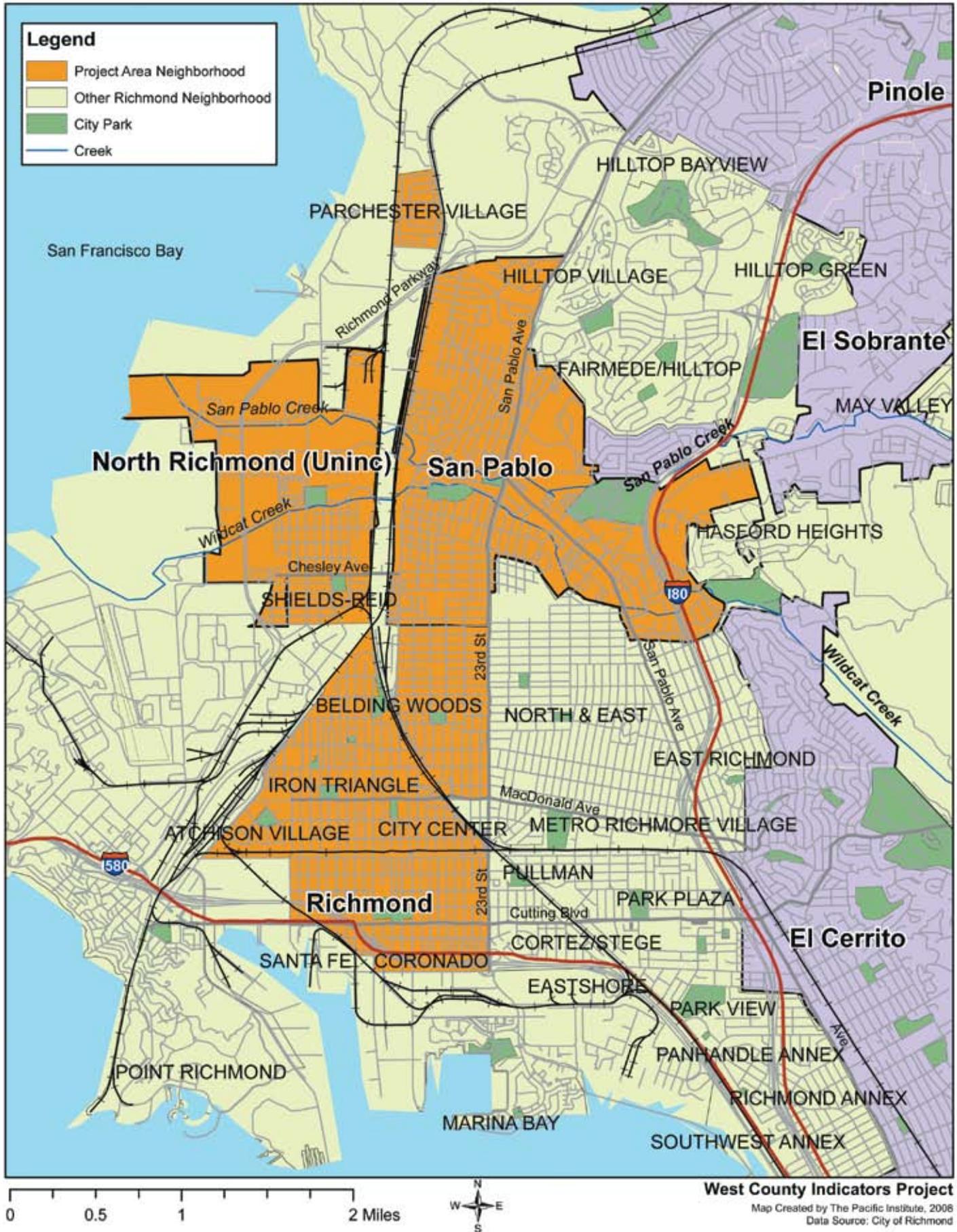
The ultimate value of this research is not in this report alone, but in how the research has been and continues to be used for attaining substantial improvements in the conditions of our neighborhoods. It is also about how

the process of creating and acting on this report builds significant capacity for change in West Contra Costa County. With these goals in mind, we hope you take this information into your hands and use it to advance economic and environmental health and justice.

ENDNOTES

1. These community “treasures” were identified by over 100 respondents in community forums and other outreach meetings in the early phases of this project, answering the question, “What are some of the things you treasure about your community?”
2. Brownfields are abandoned or underused industrial or commercial property where redevelopment is complicated by actual or perceived environmental contamination.
3. Contra Costa Health Services. (2007). Community Health for Contra Costa County. Retrieved August 20, 2008 from http://www.cchealth.org/health_data/hospital_council_2007/pdf/chape_executive_report_2007.pdf.

West County Indicators Project Neighborhoods



HEALTH, JUSTICE, AND ENVIRONMENT IN WEST COUNTY

According to the 2007 Contra Costa County Community Health Indicators Report,³ San Pablo and Richmond mothers have much higher proportions of low birth weight babies than the county rate overall. People living in San Pablo and Richmond are more likely to die from cancer and heart disease compared to the county overall. Diabetes disproportionately affects the people in these communities as well, with deaths from diabetes more than twice as likely here than the surrounding county. Children living in Richmond and San Pablo are also hospitalized for asthma at almost twice the rate of children in the rest of the county. Homicide is the third leading cause of death among men living in Richmond. In fact, nearly half of all Contra Costa County homicides occur among people living in Richmond, where residents are 4.5 times more likely to die from homicide than surrounding county residents.

Is this burden of health problems related to the concentration of environmental risks in West County neighborhoods? The definition of our environment developed by the Environmental Justice movement as “where we live, work, play, and learn” suggests that our health is very much a product of our complete physical, emotional, social, and political environment.

While health is often perceived as a function of genetic factors, individual biology, and lifestyles, in fact environmental factors (factors that are external to us) play a surprisingly large role in influencing our health. This influence can shape our individual behaviors indirectly: for example, our neighborhood environment determines whether we have access to a grocery store that stocks fresh fruits and vegetables or to parks that provide safe places to exercise, or whether we regularly interact with our neighbors in safe community spaces. But environmental factors also have a direct influence on our health:

- ▶ **What we take into our bodies directly affects our health.** To be healthy we need access to clean air, clean water, and safe, nutritious food that is free from contamination or toxics.
- ▶ **The homes and buildings where we live affect our health.** To be healthy we need stable, secure, affordable, and healthy housing. The air we breathe inside our homes should be free from mold, dust, lead, pests, and pesticides, and we should have access to regular heat, hot water, and ventilation.
- ▶ **What gets built in our neighborhoods and how well it is maintained also affects our health.** Noise and air pollution from freeways, train tracks, construction sites, and industrial facilities can lead to chronic health problems.
- ▶ **Our social, political, and economic context also affects our mental, emotional, and physical health.** The presence of violence and crime, job insecurity, and widespread poverty in our communities undermines our ability to care for our health and that of our loved ones. Strong family and community networks play a very important role in protecting our health and helping us cope with stressful or harmful conditions.

The West County Indicators Project began as an endeavor to develop information that would support community efforts to create and sustain vibrant neighborhoods that promote physical, economic, emotional, spiritual, and environmental health and well-being for all residents.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS



HEALTHY HOMES AND LEAD CONTAMINATION RISK

Issue

Toxic exposure to lead in the home, through ingesting lead-based paint chips or breathing lead-contaminated dust or soil, is still one of the largest environmental health hazards facing children throughout the nation. Children are especially vulnerable to lead's health effects, from permanent developmental damage to reductions in IQ and behavioral problems.

Findings

The potential prevalence of lead paint hazards increases with the age of a house. Families living in homes built before 1960—when lead began to be phased out of household paint—are at highest risk. In North Richmond, Richmond, and San Pablo, over 21,000, or approximately 50% of all homes were originally built before 1960, putting them at high risk for having lead paint.



ACCESS TO SHORELINE OPEN SPACE

Issue

The shoreline of West County is home to several parks, which in highly urbanized areas can provide much needed open space and refuge.

Physical barriers however, like the Richmond Parkway or the absence of usable public pathways, can prevent West County residents from accessing the majority of this vibrant shoreline.

Findings

Of the 16,379 Richmond and North Richmond residents who live within half a mile of undeveloped shoreline areas, only 4,514, or 28%, have easy physical access to publicly accessible shoreline open space. In some neighborhoods, including Parchester Village and the Richmond Annex, less than 10% of residents who *could* have easy access currently do.



FREIGHT TRANSPORT AND COMMUNITY HEALTH

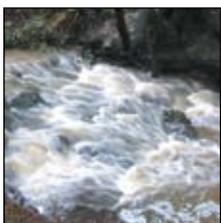
Issue

Breathing in diesel exhaust contributes to cancer, asthma, heart disease, premature birth, and other health problems. Residents living closest to

the streets, freeways, rail yards and railroad tracks used by freight trucks and trains are exposed to higher levels of diesel pollution and face greater risk of suffering health impacts.

Findings

Currently, 8,469 homes, or nearly one-in-five households in West County neighborhoods, are situated within 500 and 1,000 feet of freight transport areas. Neighborhoods with an above average percentage of homes near freight transport have a median household income of \$37,501 and are 82% people of color, while neighborhoods with a below average percentage of affected homes have a median income of \$57,571, and the percent of people of color is 69%.



WATER CONTAMINATION IN CREEKS AND BAYS

Issue

Urban waterways provide recreational opportunities for nearby residents and serve as important sources of wildlife, supporting

birds, fish, greenery, and oftentimes local subsistence fishers. Toxins from both urban run-off and industrial discharges can create health risks for people, impair the growth of plants and insects along creeks, and cause declines in marine life.

Findings

Contaminated by pollutants from agricultural uses, industrial discharge, or urban run-off, all of the creeks and bays in West Contra Costa County do not meet the San Francisco Regional Water Quality Monitoring Board's water quality standards. From 2005 through 2008, industrial facilities, which generate many of these contaminants, violated water quality regulations 204 times—an average of almost 4.5 water quality violations per month, based on Regional Board data.



FLARING AT THE CHEVRON REFINERY

Issue

A flaring event occurs when a refinery burns off unwanted gases built up in the process of refining oil. The gaseous pollutants and particulate matter released can cause many health problems for nearby residents, including respiratory problems, asthma attacks, and eye, skin, and nose irritation.

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Findings

Between 2004 and 2007, there were 142 days when the Chevron Richmond refinery flare emissions were above Air District thresholds for causing harm to nearby residents' health. There were 82 days when these flare events released at least three times the Air District safety threshold.



LIQUOR STORES AND COMMUNITY HEALTH

Issue

A high density of liquor stores in a neighborhood is linked to many community health and safety problems, including high levels of crime and violence, higher rates of alcohol-related hospitalizations, drunk driving accidents, pedestrian injuries, higher numbers of child accidents, assaults, and child abuse injuries.

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Findings

Although Richmond and San Pablo represent less than 14% of Contra Costa County's total population, together these cities hold 25% of the county's liquor stores. Almost 60% of West County schools and parks are within 1,000 feet of a liquor store, and roughly 30% of parks and schools are within 1,000 feet of two or more liquor stores.



EMPLOYMENT OF FORMERLY INCARCERATED RESIDENTS

Issue

The lack of services available and difficulties formerly incarcerated individuals face in accessing employment end up affecting the communities to which they return. When they cannot get a job, they are more likely to be arrested again for a crime. Employers who ask applicants about their legal history are less likely to hire formerly incarcerated jobseekers.

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Findings

Employment applications from Contra Costa County and all of Richmond's top employers, including the City of Richmond, ask applicants whether they have been convicted of a felony. The top ten employers in Richmond accounted for 15,273, or 29%, of the 52,390 jobs in Richmond.



CITY PARK CONDITIONS

Issue

Parks are the primary resource for physical activity in a community like West County, where access to clean, safe, and well-maintained park facilities is critical to improving residents' health by promoting active living and quality of life. The quality of a park, even more than its size or proximity, is associated with the use of a park by children and parents. The Pacific Institute worked with the Healthy Eating Active Living Collaborative of the Neighborhood House of North Richmond to support 13 youth in a participatory research project surveying all 52 parks in Richmond, North Richmond, and San Pablo.

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Findings

This survey found an average of 7.3 "bad conditions" per park, defined as the absence of a key park feature (including restrooms, ramps for the disabled, crosswalks, bike racks); the disrepair of a park feature (including benches, barbecue pits, picnic tables, water fountains, walking or bicycle paths, shelter, lights, trash cans, slides, monkey bars, sandbox, playgrounds, fields, goals, basketball, or tennis courts); or the presence of an unwanted condition (including graffiti, trash "all over the place," or broken glass).



ACCESS TO QUALITY YOUTH PROGRAMS

Issue

Youth programs offer young people the opportunity to build on their school education, increase self-confidence, acquire skills, develop relationships with caring adults, set higher goals for their future, and explore new interests. Access to these programs is particularly important for low-income and minority youth who, research indicates, have many environmental disadvantages that contribute to greater difficulties in early adulthood.

Findings

Our survey with Contra Costa Interfaith Supporting Community Organization (CCISCO) found 20 programs serving youth aged 15-to-20 years old providing 2,409 spaces, enough for 22% of all West County youth. For the 3,710 low-income youth in this area, the free or low-cost program spaces serve no more than 43%.



STREETLIGHTS AND COMMUNITY SAFETY

Issue

Street lighting is integral to the health of a community. Improved lighting can reduce crime, increase community pride and cohesiveness, and make a community feel safer. In an effort to reduce crime, residents organized by CCISCO wanted better public lighting for streets in high-crime areas of the Iron Triangle. In response, the city, working with Pacific Gas and Electric (PG&E), agreed to increase the wattage on light fixtures, beginning with a pilot project located in a five-block area between Lucas Park and Perez Elementary School.

Findings

A door-to-door survey of 200 homes in this neighborhood was completed to assess the effectiveness of the light upgrade. The survey found that 63% of residents surveyed around Lucas Park noticed the new lights. Eighty-three percent of respondents said they felt safer with brighter lights. Almost half said they noticed a decrease in criminal activity since the streetlights were upgraded, and more than half of those surveyed had seen or felt change in their neighborhood. Almost half of the lights in the Iron Triangle are still the dimmer 70-watt bulbs and remain to be upgraded.



RICHMOND'S TAX REVENUE FROM CHEVRON

Issue

Many of the public services and infrastructure Richmond residents and businesses rely on require public revenue collected by the City of Richmond—revenue largely generated from taxes and fees on local businesses, property owners, and residents. The largest business in Richmond is the Chevron refinery, whose operations occupy 13.4% of the city's land.

Findings

Based on publicly available information, Chevron paid \$25 million to the City of Richmond in 2007 through all significant taxes and fees, which amounted to about 10% of the city's total annual revenue. During a two-year period when the company donated an annual average of \$1.1 million in charitable donations for service providers, Chevron also took action to reduce its annual contributions to city revenue by an estimated \$9.4 million.