

Bay Trail advocates want state to help close gap in Richmond

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Supporters of a regional trail are turning to the state to pressure Chevron to give land and money for a public path at the oil company's Richmond refinery.

In letters and e-mails, dozens of residents are urging the State Lands Commission to require that Chevron supply land and at least partial funding for a trail as part of its 30-year lease renewal of state tidelands where the Chevron Long Wharf stands. The commission will hear the matter at 10 a.m. Wednesday, and at least two city officials plan to attend to echo the plea.

Chevron representatives have been meeting with Richmond city officials, Caltrans and the Association of Bay Area Governments to talk about a trail, but trail supporters want a guarantee.

"The (2001) feasibility study found a route that everyone agreed to, and Chevron walked away," said Bruce Beyaert, chairman of Trails for Richmond Action Committee. "Now they appear to be cooperative, but they were before, too."

The path wouldn't be long — about 0.6 miles — but trail supporters say it would close a critical gap in the regional San Francisco Bay Trail between Point Molate in Richmond and the San Pablo Peninsula.

Caltrans created a bike lane on Interstate 580 connecting the two areas, but bicyclists say it isn't safe and a separate path away from speeding traffic is a must.

A 2001 engineering study examined five potential Bay Trail routes to link Richmond with the San Pablo Peninsula, including one along the south side of I-580 on Chevron property. That option would pass over several large pipes that carry oil to and from tankers moored at the Long Wharf.

Chevron participated in the study but has since cited security reasons for opposing construction. Refinery spokesman Dean O'Hair said the study was conducted before the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks ushered in tougher security requirements.

The urgency to close the gap climaxed in 2006 when a bicyclist riding on a section of I-580 just east of the Richmond/San Rafael Bridge tollbooth was struck by a car drifting out of its lane at 60 mph. The bicyclist died, and a fellow bicyclist was seriously injured.

Participants in the meetings among Chevron, the City of Richmond, Caltrans and ABAG described recent discussions as productive. A new study will be conducted to pinpoint a route that meets the refinery's security needs and the safety of bicyclists and pedestrians. The preferred option from the 2001 study will be on the table.

"If folks think this is just about cutting down a fence, grading land and throwing gravel down and you have a trail, that's not what it's all about," O'Hair said. "This is about building a structure through a refinery and through a Caltrans easement. It's a challenging engineering feat."

Laura Thompson, Bay Trail project manager with ABAG, said discussions to close the gap will continue regardless of what the State Lands Commission decides.

The San Francisco Bay Trail is a planned 500-mile biking, walking and hiking corridor that is intended to

encircle San Francisco and San Pablo bays. Once complete, the trail would connect the shorelines of all nine Bay Area counties, link 47 cities and cross the major toll bridges. To date, 58 percent of the regional network has been built. Richmond has the most of any city at 25 miles.

Under a "community benefits agreement" between the city and Chevron in July as part of Chevron's contentious bid to retrofit its refinery, the oil company agreed to provide a Bay Trail easement valued at \$3 million and spend as much as \$2 million on security needs once the trail is built.

Beyaert said the deal did not go far enough, prompting trail advocates to turn to the state for help. The community benefits agreement carries no funding to design or build the trail, which is estimated at \$10 million, Beyaert said.

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