

State backs local pleas for trail at Chevron Richmond refinery

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Supporters of a public walking and bicycling path at the Chevron Richmond refinery have secured a powerful political ally: the State Lands Commission.

Lt. Gov. John Garamendi, who sits on the three-member body, is helping pull together a financial deal in which Chevron would supply the land and partial funding to close a 0.6-mile gap in the San Francisco Bay Trail between Point Molate and the San Pablo Peninsula.

The oil giant has said it would give an easement and \$2 million for security needs once the trail is built, but Garamendi is asking the company to provide \$3 million more for construction. Caltrans would match what Chevron gives.

The East Bay Regional Park District and the city of Richmond would chip in smaller amounts, possibly \$3 million combined. Together, the four parties could amass \$13 million to pave the way for a trail.

Garamendi said he is looking for additional partners to contribute to the "stone soup."

"We made a lot of progress. We're not there yet," Garamendi said in a phone interview. "It is an extremely important project. There is no safety in the present path. There will certainly be more accidents unless it's very quickly resolved."

The State Lands Commission will decide whether to renew Chevron's 30-year lease of state tidelands where the Chevron Long Wharf stands and oil tankers are moored. In dozens of e-mails and letters leading up to a commission hearing on the lease renewal this week, the Trails for Richmond Action Committee and other trail advocates urged the state to require that Chevron give an easement and funds to build a path as part of the lease. Supporters also testified at the hearing in Sacramento.

Caltrans created a bike lane on Interstate 580 connecting Point Molate to San Pablo Peninsula, but bicyclists call it a "death trap." In 2006, a bicyclist riding on 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.

The State Lands Commission responded to public pleas Wednesday by trying to cobble together a financial package to build the trail. The commission held off on renewing Chevron's lease that day, instead continuing the hearing to Jan. 29 so negotiations can continue.

Brent Tippen, a refinery spokesman, said Chevron remains interested in a trail and is considering Garamendi's request for construction money.

Richmond Mayor Gayle McLaughlin, who testified at the hearing, called the outcome "a very positive turn of events."

"Because this is public land and being exclusively used for private enterprise, the commission has the charge of making sure the public trust is dealt with," she said. "Since there is no public access to the Long Wharf, another access to the shoreline would be reasonable."

City Manager Bill Lindsay said city staff would recommend funding the trail to the City Council in partnership with other agencies. The money would not come from the general fund, which pays for police,

libraries and other basic public services. Other sources, such as special grant revenue and developer impact fees, likely would be tapped.

Efforts to close the trail gap have stalled in the past. A 2001 study examined five potential Bay Trail routes, including one along the south side of I-580 on Chevron property that would pass over several large pipes carrying oil to and from tankers at the Long Wharf.

Chevron participated in the study but cited security reasons for opposing construction.

Refinery spokesman Dean O'Hair has said the study was conducted before the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks resulted in tougher security requirements.

He said Chevron is in talks with the city, Caltrans and the Association of Bay Area Government to discuss a trail that meets security needs.

Trail supporters, however, are frustrated with negotiations that they say have hit resistance from Chevron and progressed too slowly.

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