

COMMENTS BY SUPERVISOR JOHN GIOIA

TO RICHMOND CITY COUNCIL – 10/17/17

UNITING RICHMOND

Good evening Mayor Butt and Councilmembers. I'm John Gioia, I live in Richmond, and I've had the honor and privilege of representing North Richmond as its County Supervisor for the last 19 years.

I'm proud to say that during this time there's been a great partnership between the City, the County and the North Richmond community which has resulted in many positive improvements.

Together, we've built affordable housing, we've increased services at the county's community health center, we built a new senior housing project, we strongly supported Verde Elementary School, we constructed major streetscape improvements along Fred Jackson Way, we supported many community beautification projects, including community gardens. And a lot more.

And now, we're breaking ground on a new mixed use housing project with CHDC, building an Urban Farm with Urban Tilth, working on a satellite literacy and reading project at the Shields-Reid Community Center.

We've done a lot together.

Over the past few months there have been numerous community meetings to discuss the pros and cons of annexation. There are community members on both sides of this debate. Its important to listen to those voices.

As I reflect on my experience representing North Richmond for many years, and listening carefully to residents recently and over the years, and after studying the financial and service analysis prepared by an impartial consultant, I've come to the belief that North Richmond residents will benefit over the long term by becoming part of the City.

I believe that North Richmond has a chance to advance the improvements we've collectively made by becoming part of the City, instead of remaining an isolated unincorporated pocket totally surrounded by the City of Richmond.

But, let me also stress -- I strongly believe that the residents of North Richmond should have a strong voice in this decision. Those who do not live in North Richmond should not be making the decision for them since they will be the ones who will live with this decision.

The impartial analysis clearly showed that, after annexation, North Richmond property owners would pay a higher real property tax and a higher real estate transfer tax, and residents would also pay a utility tax that they do not currently pay.

But renters, who make up a majority of North Richmond residents, would be protected under Richmond's existing rent control laws since the County has no rent control.

I've heard from community members who believe that annexation would achieve a better, safer and more prosperous future by allowing North Richmond residents the ability to have a voice in Richmond city elections, and representation through the City Council.

I agree with those residents who've said that annexation has the potential to make North Richmond and all of Richmond safer by eliminating the boundaries between the City and County that now divide law enforcement and first responder jurisdictions.

I also agree with those who believe that annexation can also mean more efficient delivery of planning and public works services and easier access to Richmond City Hall, as opposed to the County Building, over 20 miles away in Martinez.

Even after annexation the County would still provide health and social services to North Richmond residents. That would not change.

But, I've also heard from residents who are concerned about paying more taxes by being part of the City of Richmond. I respect those concerns.

As you've heard from the Executive Director of LAFCO, the LAFCO process, under state law, does not set up a mechanism to have a binding vote at this point in the process to determine whether to proceed with starting annexation proceedings.

So, the key question -- how do we empower more community voices to be heard before committing to annexation.

It seems that one way to do that is to follow an example from the City of Antioch several years ago.

Richmond can mail out a ballot to North Richmond residents along with an impartial fact sheet and frequently asked questions about annexation and ask residents to return that ballot in a postage pre-paid envelope.

This would allow the city to seek the residents' input now rather than wait for an advisory election next June. It would also allow you to provide voters with more information to make their decision than what could be mailed out in an official County advisory election.

Both a city mailing or an advisory election achieve the same goal of seeking greater community input. And the city mailing is less costly than an election.

The City can simultaneously submit an annexation application to LAFCO while conducting this informal election.

The City can then stop the process depending on the results after the ballots are returned.

If a majority of the residents support annexation and the process moves forward, there is still another opportunity for the residents and property owners to weigh in.

If the 25% protest threshold is reached, there is a binding election to determine whether to approve or reject the annexation.

So residents get two opportunities to weigh in – during the initial city balloting process and the official LAFCO process.

Let me close with these final thoughts –

Making North Richmond part of Richmond would correct past mistakes.

You all know that North Richmond is a community that was created partly by racist housing policies that restricted where African-Americans could buy homes, and by political gerrymandering when Richmond annexed areas of Hilltop and El Sobrante while bypassing North Richmond.

Ultimately, North Richmond residents and property owners will determine whether increased taxes are a reasonable investment to support more convenient and more effective city services.

I think conducting this city ballot process while submitting the annexation application and reserving the right to terminate the process, respects the voices of North Richmond residents.

Whether or not North Richmond becomes part of the City of Richmond, I remain committed to providing the best services to residents and continuing the existing strong partnerships to improve the quality of life for all residents.