

While the recent elections were seen as a setback for national environmental advocates, for the small city of Richmond in San Francisco's East Bay, it marked a tidal shift in a seven-year battle to protect Point Molate, the last large undeveloped headland on the bay from a mega-casino. Here, at least, the election demonstrated that poor communities can assert their right to control

their own shorelines and perhaps their own destinies -- despite outside pressure.

On the winning side were local activists of Citizens for a Sustainable Point Molate and the Richmond Progressive Alliance, which includes the Green Party Mayor of this low-income, predominantly African-American and Hispanic city of just over 100,000.

On the side that didn't win was a Berkeley developer with plans for a billion dollar casino resort at the headlands, a small band of Pomo Indians hoping to break into urban gaming, and an even smaller band of environmentalists willing to cut a multi-million dollar deal with them just before Richmond was to vote on the casino.

Also, never to be left out of local politics was the Chevron corporation that, with a major oil refinery in the city, put a million dollars behind three city council candidates who were not only pro-Chevron but also pro-casino (though one who had voted for the development while on the council opposed the casino in the election).

The 422 acres of spectacular bay-facing green space, wildlife habitat and submerged eel grass meadows known as Point Molate is the site of an historic wine port and village that later became part of a Navy fuel oil depot before the Navy sold it to the city in 2003 for one dollar. From a historic point of view, I guess you could argue that after alcohol and oil, gambling might make sense in terms of human addictions.

Upstream LLC, the consortium put together by Berkeley developer Jim Levine, promised to build the most eco-sustainable "destination resort" casino this side of Vegas. Levine, who originally had financial backing from Harrah's, now claims backing from one of California's major gaming tribes (attributing any lack of financial transparency to issues of tribal sovereignty). Still, his support on the city council had slipped during the economic slowdown from 5-2 to 4-3 with Mayor Gayle McLaughlin leading the opposition.

After years of promises and delays, the city council finally agreed to a non-binding Ballot Measure U this fall that for the first time let the citizens of Richmond vote on whether they support a casino complex on their waterfront.

One concern has been that Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar would have to agree to convert Point Molate into reservation land for a small tribal band with no anthropological links to the Bay Area (a legal requirement). Senator Feinstein opposes this conversion. Local Representative George Miller, a long-time environmental champion and former Chair of the House Natural Resources Committee, had been eerily quiet on the issue although he did attend a pre-election pro-Casino press conference put on by the Building Trades Council.

From its inception Measure U was heavily fought over with close to a million dollars spent on the initiative both by the "destination resort," casino developer (\$500,000) and local card rooms and smaller Indian gaming interests (over \$450,000) who didn't want competition from a monster casino with 4,000 slot machines.

Two weeks before the election, a press conference was held on the headlands where Upstream, the Guidiville Band of Pomo and three green groups announced an agreement to drop a longstanding environmental lawsuit in exchange for a promised \$48 million pay out from the slots to buy up additional shoreline for conservation (that could mostly be outside of Richmond). "When you have money, you draw money. It's a major shoreline protection agreement," claimed Robert Cheasty, president of Citizens for East Shore Parks that was dropping its suit. The San Francisco Chapter of Sierra Club and local Audubon also endorsed the deal and added their names to a pro-casino flyer that went out to voters a few days later.

The Richmond-based Citizens for a Sustainable Point Molate claimed the agreement "threw Richmond under the gambling bus," and released a letter from twenty other Bay Area environmental groups opposed to the Casino, calling instead for a world-class park at the point similar to San Francisco's Presidio and Marin County's Fort Baker.

When the people finally got their say they rejected the pro-Casino Measure U by a vote of 57.5 percent to 42.5 percent. Mayor Gayle McLaughlin, despite being outspent by her opponent almost two to one, was re-elected along with two anti-casino candidates, her fellow Progressive Alliance running mate Jovanka Beckles, a children's mental health provider and long-time city hall gadfly Corky Booze. None of the Chevron backed candidates won.

The new city council majority taking over in January will likely be voting 5-2 against the Casino at Point Molate. "People want to see something better there," explained Jovanka Beckles. Of course, lots of mischief could still take place during the old council's lame duck session.

Still, Richmond shows what a dynamic, community-tied coalition of environmentalists and political progressives can achieve when working outside the traditional two-party system, unafraid of entrenched corporate interests.

Meanwhile Citizens for a Sustainable Point Molate has begun working with a pro-bono group of young urban planners to envision what a working park on the headlands and offshore might look like. They will soon start engaging others in the community in the long process of turning that vision into a third major jewel of Bay area waterfront parks that can provide jobs, recreation and natural wonder for all.

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