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Banking on history: Mechanics Bank restores Trainmasters Building to open a branch office

East Bay Business Times - by [Mavis Scanlon](#)

Stephanie Secrest | East Bay Business Times
Rauly Butler in the new Mechanics Bank in Point Richmond.



More than a century after it was first used as a reading room to improve the minds (and morals) of Atchison, **Topeka & Santa Fe Railroad** employees, the historic Trainmasters Building will reopen Oct. 29 as the new Point Richmond office of **The Mechanics Bank**.

The Mechanics Bank signed a lease on the building in March, 18 months after it had been moved to its current location, at West Richmond Avenue near the entrance to Point Richmond. That move was the culmination of a 15-year fight to save the building, which had been empty for more than two decades and was badly deteriorated.

The 104-year old building's rich heritage dates back to the founding of the city of Richmond. "This is the only building left from the original Santa Fe Rail yards," said Richmond City Councilman Tom Butt, an architect and preservationist who is widely credited with leading the long fight to save the building from the wrecking ball. Richmond grew up to serve the railroad and the **Chevron Corp.** Richmond refinery.

At a time when the local entertainment consisted of "bars and bordellos," Butt said, the building stood out as a community center for railroad workers, and was one of many that the railroad built across the West.

The Mechanics Bank spent \$1.4 million and seven months working with local architects to renovate the building with period details, from hand-built wood walls to old-fashioned globe light fixtures over desks that are shaped to conceal modern technological additions. No walls were cut open for ATMs to preserve the historical nature of the building. Instead, a kiosk was added at the front of the building.

"The experience that we're looking for is 'wow, I've just walked back in time,'" said Rauly Butler, senior vice president and retail banking manager of The Mechanics Bank.

Butler was scouting for a new location for the Point Richmond office when he spotted the building, which he dubbed "the yellow beacon." The bank's previous Point Richmond location, located across the street, was hard to see and had been the target of a number of robberies; the state was also looking to lease the space since the California Department of Justice operates a 68,000-square foot DNA crime lab nearby. High-tech security features such as digital cameras are small and inconspicuous, Butler noted. "We can't compromise on technology." At 2,000 square feet, the branch is about a third smaller than the previous office, so it is not only intimate, but laid out to the last detail, Butler said.

One big challenge for the bank was getting board approval to move to a location just across the street, and second, spending more than \$1 million to do it. In his initial presentation to the board, Butler expected the bank to ultimately save money compared to the operating costs of the former, larger location. But the \$1.4 million final cost was over the projected budget of \$1 million and Butler now expects the project to break even. The compelling piece of the bank's argument to take on the project was its clear and demonstrated commitment to the community, Butler said. The project included landscaping a public park with almost 1,000 plants.

The renovation and the park have transformed the entrance to quaint Point Richmond.

"The entrance to town was quite ugly," said Martin McNair, a Mechanics Bank board member and president of the Point Richmond Gateway Foundation, which was formed to save the building. The bank will pay rent to the foundation, which will use the funds to maintain the small Gateway Park in front of the building and to make community grants.

In coming months the bank will hold community events at the new location, including holiday events and a "Taste of Point Richmond" planned for the spring.

The Mechanics Bank

Business: Banking and financial services

Headquarters: Richmond

Founded: 1905

President and CEO: Steven K. Buster

Employees: 630

2006 net interest and noninterest income: \$118.7 million

2006 net income: \$26.5 million

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