



2 years since gas disaster hit region

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Two years after the gas disaster of Sept. 13, 2018 the sounds of blaring sirens and helicopters overhead trigger an unmatched fear among locals forced to flee Lawrence, Andover and North Andover that day.

Could it happen again?

That was one of several concerns discussed Saturday, during a virtual commemoration hosted by the Merrimack Valley Project. The local advocacy group for community betterment connected residents with state officials and renewable energy experts via Zoom to reflect and learn about what comes next for the communities marred.

Among the 40 in attendance were three residents who shared anecdotes from one of their worst days.

“I couldn’t light the stove to make dinner,” said North Andover resident Kerri Ann Kilkelly of the seemingly ordinary minutes before an overpressurized gas line owned by Columbia Gas erupted in Lawrence.

“Our family spent four days away from home. When we were allowed back in, we had no power for two days,” she said. “There was no heat, hot water or cooking for three months after that. And I know we were among the lucky ones.”

The Kilkelly family adapted to cold showers, nights and traditions — including a full Thanksgiving dinner prepared without appliances that relied on gas.

Though her home, family and neighborhood look and feel back to normal after two years, she said, long stripes of patched asphalt branching off to houses on her street are visual reminders of what is different.

The repair work has happened amidst another major change — the sale of Columbia Gas of Massachusetts to Eversource Energy, expected to be finalized in November along with a \$56 million settlement.

Massachusetts Assistant Attorney General Elizabeth Mahony and Commissioner of the Department of Energy Resources Patrick Woodcock explained the status of that deal on Saturday, as well as how the money will help victims.

“We’re waiting for the Department of Public Utilities to decide on the settlement offering,” said Mahony. “Hopefully that happens at the end of this month. That will allow for the sale to be finalized and hopefully the transfer of assets will happen in November.”

The deal requires the company to pay for a variety of programs, one of which is the creation of an “Energy Relief Fund” that will help approximately 26,000 low-income customers across the company’s three service territories by wiping out nearly \$15 million in accumulated debt on their gas bills.

A portion of the money will also be used to explore options for a shift from gas to energy efficient means of power.

Zeyneb Magavi of HEET, the Home Energy Efficiency Team, explained “we want to move communities away from gas,” therefore silencing concerns of another gas explosion.

An option, according to Magavi, is ground source heat pumps.

“If something goes wrong, if you have a pipe break, then you get a puddle,” she said. “Not an explosion.”

“But they are expensive to build,” she added. “And they require land. So the question becomes, how do we get them at a low cost for everyone? What if we use the street and share piping, kind of like our gas system, but without gas?”

She added, “Now is the time for those conversations.”

A Lawrence woman who identified herself during the meeting only as Mercedes spoke about her experiences for the first time during the meeting. Her hope, she said in Spanish for a translator to convey in English, is to promote change and engage in those types of crucial community talks.

“I thought the world was ending seeing this terrible nightmare outside with so many desperate people running from one side to the other,” she said. “And sirens sounding everywhere and me not knowing where to go.”

Even now, she said, “I can’t stop thinking about that moment that I have imprinted on my mind.”