

# THE SUN

## Legislature should create comprehensive bill to address gas line safety



Photo courtesy of WCVB

In this Sept. 13 file image from video provided by WCVB in Boston, flames consume the roof of a home following an explosion in Lawrence. Columbia Gas of Massachusetts and its parent, NiSource Inc., announced Monday, July 29, 2019, a settlement had been reached in class action lawsuits resulting from the disaster across several towns north of Boston.

By **EDITORIAL**  
1:13 a.m.

November 15, 2019 at

More than a year after over-pressurized natural gas lines caused a series of explosions and fires that killed one person and drove more than 50,000 residents from their homes, people living in Lawrence, Andover and North Andover remain on edge over the condition of those gas lines running through their communities.

Ana Javier, a Lawrence resident who volunteers with the faith-based advocacy organization the Merrimack Valley Project, was among those who explained how the Sept. 13, 2018, Columbia

Gas disaster in the Merrimack Valley still hangs over their communities at a hearing before the Joint Committee on Telecommunications, Utilities and Energy earlier this week.

That panel, co-chaired by state Rep. Tom Golden, a Lowell Democrat, is in the process of studying several natural gas regulation and safety-oriented bills.

Javier related the frustration many families still experience when dealing with Columbia Gas, including dismissive responses to reports of a gas smell in their homes.

Sen. Diana DiZoglio, a Methuen Democrat who represents North Andover and other area towns, informed the committee that nearly every Merrimack Valley-area lawmaker testified at Tuesday's hearing, indicative of their willingness to work on a comprehensive gas-safety bill.

The conclusions of a National Transportation Safety Board's probe into the cause of the natural gas pipeline disaster found that Columbia Gas did not "adequately plan, review, sequence, and oversee," the construction project that ultimately caused an over-pressurization of the natural gas distribution system, which sparked those multiple fires and explosions.

The state also plans to conduct an extensive, months-long review of this gas pipeline debacle. Matthew Nelson, chair of the state Department of Public Utilities, previously indicated that the agency will look into its cause, as well as Columbia Gas' response.

No doubt, the DPU will come to the same conclusions as the NTSB — that mistakes of commission and omission by Columbia Gas caused this natural-gas calamity.

In an obvious admission of its role in the three-community disaster, Columbia Gas, in conjunction with its parent company, NiSource Inc., agreed in July to pay \$143 million to settle all class-action lawsuits related to the explosions.

But concerns about the safety of the state's natural gas infrastructure goes beyond one ill-prepared company's shoddy performance.

Dynamic Risk Assessment Systems Inc., a firm contracted by Gov. Charlie Baker's administration to examine the safety of our natural-gas infrastructure in the wake of the Merrimack Valley disaster, indicated in its initial report earlier this year that Massachusetts' gas distribution system is "generally reliable," but is made up of a higher proportion of leak-prone pipes, mains, and services made out of cast iron, wrought iron or unprotected steel.

That's due to the advanced age of these gas lines, many of which were installed more than 100 years ago. That's especially true in older industrial, Gateway Cities like Lawrence, Lowell and Fitchburg.

No matter how conscientious the utility, an aged delivery system complicates maintenance efforts and presents the potential for additional gas-line breakdowns and explosions.

That's why it's imperative that other lawmakers join legislators in the three affected communities and take the lead in coming up with a comprehensive bill that addresses this critical safety issue.

It will come at a cost, but we can't afford to live with the status quo.