

Disaster Cited in Push for Comprehensive Gas Safety Bill

Colin A. Young 11/12/19 5:39 PM



"Our city, our kids, our youth, they're still traumatized" more than a year after the Merrimack Valley gas explosions, Ana Javier of Lawrence told lawmakers Tuesday. "I imagine when we hear those sirens go off, I see the kids running and asking, 'Mom, are we going to explode? Are we going to die?'" [Photo: Sam Doran/SHNS]

STATE HOUSE, BOSTON, NOV. 12, 2019.....More than a year after overpressurized natural gas lines caused a fatal string of explosions and fires that drove more than 50,000 residents from their homes, people living in Lawrence, Andover and North Andover remain frightened that the gas lines running through their communities are not safe.

Ana Javier, a Lawrence resident who volunteers with the faith-based advocacy organization the Merrimack Valley Project, described the frustration of residents who smell gas in their homes only to be told by the gas company that there is no problem, the mistrust many residents have for Columbia Gas and the anxiety and fear that bubbles back to the surface for many when they hear sirens.

"That fear, that trauma, is still within them," she said. "Our community is still in fear and I think we need an alternative or an answer to this."

Javier and others shared stories about how the Sept. 13, 2018 gas disaster in the Merrimack Valley affected them and their communities at a hearing of the Joint Committee on Telecommunications, Utilities and Energy as lawmakers on that panel weigh a number of natural gas regulation and safety-oriented bills.

Sen. Diana DiZoglio, who represents North Andover and other area towns, pointed out to the committee that nearly every Merrimack Valley-area lawmaker showed up to testify on gas safety legislation Tuesday, and said the delegation is ready to work toward a far-reaching gas safety bill.

"Coming together, we all stand before you in the hopes that this committee can work together with the Merrimack Valley delegation to come up with a comprehensive bill of sorts that will help our region and this commonwealth when it comes to gas pipeline safety," she said, flanked by several other area elected officials.

A company contracted by the Baker administration to examine the safety of natural gas infrastructure in the wake of the Merrimack Valley disaster, Dynamic Risk Assessment Systems Inc., wrote in its initial report earlier this year that Massachusetts's 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. It flagged emergency response preparedness and safety as topics that must become greater points of emphasis at most every level of utility companies and the state's Department of Public Utilities.

The committee's Tuesday hearing featured more than 30 bills dealing with natural gas, but a handful of the bills got the bulk of the attention.

Much of the region's legislative delegation -- along with Lawrence Mayor Dan Rivera, Andover Town Manager Andrew Flanagan and Comptroller Andrew Maylor, who was North Andover's town manager during the gas crisis -- testified in favor of legislation (H 2850/S 1967) filed by Reps. Lori Ehrlich of Marblehead and Frank Moran of Lawrence and Sen. Barry Finegold of Andover that would impose fines on utility companies that delay responses to emergencies, hasten the pace of certain leak repairs, and require better communication between utilities and municipal officials.

The bill would require a public utility company to call on other public utility companies for help immediately after an emergency arises, whereas current law allows but does not require utility company mutual aid. It would also direct the Department of Public Utilities to convene a task force with gas companies to develop emergency response plans specific to various foreseeable causes of natural gas pipeline failures and would give the DPU chairperson the power to set a date on which gas service that was terminated as a result of a declared emergency must be restored.



"If you pass these bills, what you will be doing is protecting the humanity -- the children, the families, the communities -- that use these services. These regulations are the least you can do to hold these utilities to a higher level of safety and responsibility," Rivera said of the suite of bills before the committee.

Finegold said it was "amazing" how fast fire and police officials from surrounding towns responded to help in Lawrence, Andover and North Andover last year, but said "it took way too long" for other gas companies to be called in to help with the restoration work. Rivera agreed.

"People came right away when it came to mutual aid in the public sector. In the utility sector, it actually took until the very next morning -- it was 1 o'clock or 2 o'clock in the morning -- before they called for mutual aid," Rivera said. "The reason is when we call for mutual aid the communities absorb the cost of mutual aid. When they call for mutual aid, the company calling for mutual aid has to pay for the responding [companies]. Now, they didn't say they were making decisions based on money, but it sure looked like they were making a decision based on money."

In addition to imposing new fees on investor-owned utilities for failure to restore gas service or if an investigation finds the utility is at fault for an incident, the bill would also require gas companies and municipalities to establish communication plans that formalize a protocol for regular communication between both entities. Maylor told lawmakers that it was "remarkably profound how little communication there was" during the chaos of September 2018.

"It should not take a fire to force companies like Columbia Gas to talk to communities and to update us as to what's going on. It shouldn't take a fire and explosion for companies to fulfill their obligations to maintain and repair gas pipelines," Rep. Tram Nguyen of Andover said. "And we need to impose hefty fines because there is no other incentive for them to do better."

Another bill (H 2849/S 1940) filed by Sen. Cynthia Creem and Ehrlich -- who said she earned the nickname "The Mother Grizzly of Marblehead" during her years as a public health and environmental advocate -- would put in place "a multi-faceted approach to transitioning our state towards renewable thermal energy by 2048 and away from the explosive fossil fuels we use now," Ehrlich's office said.

Ehrlich's bill would allow gas utilities to pipe renewable thermal energy to homes and would require those companies to add more renewable thermal each year, which Ehrlich's office said would move "our gas system and its workers towards a modern energy system with safe jobs" by reducing the use of natural gas.

"We have an important obligation and opportunity to learn from the deadly day of Sept. 13, 2018, that traumatized an entire region of our state and killed one young man. We must lead the way out of our dangerous past," Ehrlich said about transitioning away from gas.

In testimony submitted to the committee Tuesday, the trade and business groups that together form the Mass. Coalition for Sustainable Energy expressed its condolences for the tragedy in the Merrimack Valley but urged lawmakers not to abandon natural gas, which it said is cost-effective, reliable 365 days a year and is much cleaner than oil and coal.

"Our goal is to ensure the Commonwealth remains a climate change leader while addressing the electricity and heating challenges facing us going forward. We cannot do one without the other," the group, which includes the Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce, Mass. Business Roundtable, and Associated Industries of Massachusetts, wrote in its testimony supporting efforts to improve pipeline safety. "A strategic expansion of our access to natural gas supplies solves both of these problems in the near term while giving renewable sources of energy a realistic opportunity to come online."

Senate Minority Leader Bruce Tarr, of Gloucester, testified in support of a number of the bills on the docket Tuesday, telling the committee that many of the bills provide "the path forward" on gas safety.

"Given what we saw in the Merrimack Valley in terms of the tragic loss of life, the disruption of lives, the hardship inflicted upon people by something that was avoidable, we must, as a Legislature, move forward to do whatever it takes to prevent those things from ever happening again," Tarr said.

-END-

11/12/2019