

Online forum focused on gas explosion renewal fund

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LAWRENCE — Fifty people participated in a Zoom meeting on Saturday to discuss the status of \$41 million in yet-to-be-released funds promised to Lawrence residents in support of their ongoing recovery from the Columbia Gas explosions of 2018.

One of the outcomes of the meeting is that the office of Attorney General Maura Healy, which is overseeing the Merrimack Valley Renewal Fund, plans to simplify a survey that was said to be too complicated for many Lawrence residents to interpret and properly answer in order for the state to determine their needs.

All presentations during the meeting were translated into Spanish immediately after they were presented in English.

Three years have passed since the Columbia Gas accident shook the Merrimack Valley, leveling several homes, igniting fires in 40 others, killing one person, and leaving 8,600 families in the dark and in the cold, according to officials with the Merrimack Valley Project, who hosted the meeting.

They said the brunt of the accident was borne by Lawrence's most vulnerable residents, many of them immigrants who — unlike their more affluent neighbors in Andover and North Andover — had neither the means, nor the skills, nor the language proficiency, to tackle this disruption to their lives. Three years later, the community continues to suffer from that terrible event, they said.

Elizabeth Mahony, who represented Attorney General Maura Healey's Office during the meeting, said \$15.2 million of the \$56 million settlement that had been reached with Columbia's parent company, NiSource, was used to pay overdue gas bills for 17,000 customers.

She said an advisory committee made up of members of the community will decide on how the remaining \$41 million will be spent.

Mahony said \$21 million will go to increase access to efficient and clean energy for low- and moderate-income residential and multi-unit housing; \$3.5 million will be targeted to energy efficiency and heat pumps for market rate housing and \$3 million is for public affordable housing energy efficiency.

“Another goal is to improve the housing stock in Lawrence, Andover and North Andover where residents have been left out of the energy efficiency program as it can be a hard program to navigate,” she said.

She noted the LMI Residential Building Excellence Grant launched in April is geared to large projects of more than six housing units, where developers or building managers present plans and designs to qualify for funding.

A residential program for low-and moderate-income will focus on individual housing units, landlord situations and individual homeowners.

A building excellence program will be funded with \$5 million and will require rent stabilization.

“We don’t want to invest in building to force out low-income residents,” Mahony said.

To further enrich the three communities, \$6 million will go to Lawrence, Andover, and North Andover for projects such as solar panels on schools.

She said \$4 million will pay for a heating thermal electric unit for serve multi-housing buildings with residential and commercial tenants, and a small business community fund of \$2 million will support energy efficiency and clean energy.

Ana Javier, long time leader of Merrimack Valley Project, told Mahony that Lawrence has much poverty, a lack of resources and has language barriers.

She said the survey the state is asking people to respond is complex for many in Lawrence and asked that it be simplified in hopes that more people in the community will respond.

The survey results will be used by the advisory committee to shape new programs.

Mahony said she would look into revising the survey.

“We also want to improve communication with all involved,” Mahony said. “We know the communities are suffering and are in need, but we want to take the time to do this right.”

To access and participate in the current version of the survey, visit mass.gov/doer/MVsurvey.

