

PSE hasn't tracked abandoned gas lines; businesses want utility to pay for explosion

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By Vernal Coleman

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Puget Sound Energy (PSE) doesn't know where its decommissioned gas lines are and is in talks with the state about a plan to find them and make sure they were properly cut and sealed.

That comes after a state investigation into a gas explosion that leveled several businesses and damaged many more in Seattle's Greenwood neighborhood last March. Investigators found that a PSE contractor did not properly cut and cap a natural-gas line in 2004, and it exploded when someone broke it 12 years later.

In September, Washington utilities regulators said they did not keep an inventory of all the supposedly decommissioned gas pipelines, because they presume those lines don't have gas in them. PSE, at the time, did not respond to questions about its decommissioned lines.

But Andy Wappler, PSE vice president of customer operations, said Wednesday the utility is in talks with regulators about developing a plan to identify the abandoned lines and ensure they aren't potential hazards. PSE serves almost 800,000 gas customers in six counties, through 26,000 miles of pipelines.

"From our standpoint, no one wants to see something like the Greenwood explosion happen again," Wappler said. "If there are things that we can learn, practices we need to change, or new practices we need to adopt to be more effective and ensure safety, we'll do that."

The pledge comes amid continuing negotiations between the staff of the Washington Utilities and Transportation Commission (UTC) and PSE over the utility's role in the Greenwood explosion.

A complaint filed by the UTC in September accuses PSE of unsafe practices, claiming that a contractor hired by PSE did not properly decommission the natural-gas line that investigators said ultimately caused the explosion.

The UTC later hit the utility with 17 alleged violations of pipeline-safety regulations, and recommended requiring the company identify and correct any other improperly abandoned pipelines in its system.

If the violations are affirmed by the UTC board's three commissioners, the utility could face up to \$3.2 million in penalties.

PSE officials and UTC staffers met Wednesday as part of ongoing settlement talks, UTC spokeswoman Amanda Maxwell confirmed. Those discussions are not public, and staff are not authorized to comment on them, Maxwell said.

The two sides have until July 6, when UTC board has scheduled a hearing on the staff's allegations, to reach a settlement.

Meanwhile, business owners affected by the blast have called on PSE to take financial responsibility for the explosion.

Several business owners say they are struggling to recover after their businesses were damaged and are asking the utility to pay up.

"All we want is to be made whole again," Chaco Canyon Organic Cafe's Chris Maykut said in a statement.

Eleni Ponirakis, owner and chef at Kouzina, a Greek cafe near the epicenter of the blast, said her business was severely impacted when the explosion damaged her kitchen. "If I don't have a space by the end of the month I'll have no choice but to shutter for good," she said.

City Councilmember Mike O'Brien said he's working with several business owners to explore ways in which victims of utility explosions could be compensated.

O'Brien said he also would work to persuade state officials to create an oversight process for ensuring that decommissioned gas lines have been properly closed.

"Even if PSE ends up paying the full fine, none of that money goes directly to the people who are affected," O'Brien said. "And unlike the utility, the small-business owners who have almost no recourse in this situation have no resources to fall back while this sorts out."

A spokeswoman for the utility said of the 10 insurance claims the company has received from business owners, three remain unresolved.

Wappler acknowledged that the compensation process is too slow.

"If there is a way that we can be in a position to fairly and accurately compensate someone for their losses, we're in support of that," he said.