

Docket # D.P.U. 19-140
Merrimack Valley Gas Hearing Comments

The gas crisis in the Merrimack Valley was “the largest disruption of the gas system in the history of the industry” according to the then CEO of Columbia Gas. This was a preventable tragedy. I worked for a telecommunications company for many years and, even 20 years ago, and for a much “safer” industry than gas distribution, there was a process of review by a team of experts before any product was delivered. Records of changes to the original design were maintained. There was a process that dealt with unforeseen failures in the network. No single person had the ability to take down the system. Should Columbia Gas have had such a process, so much suffering would have been avoided. At last week’s hearing in Lawrence, we learned that the DPU can fine Columbia Gas up to \$100M because of their culpability in this disruption. I hope you do.

The residents of the Merrimack Valley were put through a frightening experience. We heard testimony last week at the hearing that some residents are still suffering anxiety and trauma as a result of their experiences. Gas is frightening. But it is frightening not just because it explodes, but also because it is a fossil fuel, releasing greenhouse gas emissions when it leaks into the air and when it is burned to heat our homes. Not only does it fuel our homes, it fuels climate disruption.

We know from the UN report released in the fall of 2018, when the MV was in the midst of gas chaos, that we have until 2030 to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 45% and until 2050 to be net-zero. What if the fines imposed by the DPU could be earmarked for transitioning the Merrimack Valley off gas, helping the state meet its emissions reduction goals while also helping the residents of the Merrimack Valley regain their sense of security?

Lawrence, in particular, as the second poorest city in the state, would be hard-pressed to make that transition without significant financial assistance. This was our hope in the aftermath of the gas explosions. Unfortunately, Columbia Gas' only vision was one of maintaining the status quo. They should have been jumping through hoops to assuage

the public and rebuilding with the most energy efficient equipment on the market.

With the monies levied by the DPU, we might finally get homes in Lawrence, Andover and North Andover insulated after updating the antiquated electrical system in many of the stock of old homes here. The homes would then be ready for heat pumps, providing both heat and air conditioning, which will be necessary as summers get hotter as the climate crisis advances.

There is a bill being considered in the legislature that would encourage utilities to shift from gas to geothermal energy. When this is decided, the Merrimack Valley could have an opportunity for thermal district energy. The fines could provide the required residential equipment. There will be rooftops that would be appropriate for solar installations. Community solar projects might be financed as well. We could have electric heating and cooling powered by solar.

Since we must move off fossil fuels, why not start now in the Merrimack Valley? We could be a model for other transitions, both for low income communities and more affluent ones.

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