

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

Eerie parallels with Allentown blast

Last week, Borough Manager Justin Keller advised Pottstown Council it may take a long time to pinpoint the cause of the May 26 home explosion on Hale Street that killed five people.

“Just as a point of reference, the investigation into a deadly home explosion in Allentown that occurred in 2011 took about 16 months to complete.”



Commentary by
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The full investigation may have taken 16 months, but from Day One a leaking gas pipe under a street was the prime suspect, which turned out to be the case.

There are parallels between the Allentown and Pottstown explosions.

About 10 p.m. the evening of Feb. 10, 2011, the Allentown explosion blew up a house at 13th and Allen streets, killing its three occupants. The blast started a fire that killed an elderly couple next door and gutted an adjacent row of homes. Eight houses were lost in all.

The next day, a spokesman for the gas utility, UGI, told the *Morning Call*, “I think we are going under the assumption it was a gas explosion, but it has not been confirmed to be the case.”

As UGI dug up Allen Street looking for a leak in a gas main, the company conducted a six-block survey in the neighborhood surrounding the explosion and found three small leaks which it repaired.

Likewise, PECO made emergency repairs June 6 of a gas main a block from the Hale Street explosion after reports of a leak.

PECO said it will be surveying all

its infrastructure within a half-mile of the blast over the next few weeks to check for other leaks.

Unlike Allentown, there was a propane gas tank on the Hale Street property, and leaking propane might have sunken into the ground and infiltrated the house.

Meanwhile, investigators from the safety division of the Public Utility Commission have started gathering information regarding the cause and circumstances of the Pottstown blast.

An enormous and intricate system of underground pipes distributes natural gas to homes and businesses in communities all across the country.

Pennsylvania has more than 48,000 miles of distribution mains, most of which are running under roads and streets.

In addition, there are more than 25,000 miles of service pipes which go from the mains under the street to individual buildings. Once the utility pipe connects to the meter, the property owner is responsible to maintain the pipe into the property.

Natural gas is lighter than air. When an underground leak occurs, the gas usually rises to the surface, where it can dissipate into the air. But not always. House explosions can be caused in the unusual cases where leaking gas travels along gas, water or sewer lines or other crevices into a basement where it collects in enough concentration to be ignited by a spark or any kind of heat source.

Considering the massive size of Pennsylvania’s natural gas infrastructure, explosions are relatively rare.

In the last 20 years, there have been 310 serious incidents in Pennsylvania, causing 21 deaths and 54 injuries.

But that’s no comfort to the victims of the Hale Street tragedy.



FIVE CROSSES and two angels mark the spot where a house blew up on North 13th Street in Allentown on Feb. 10, 2011, killing five people. Eight homes had to be demolished because of the explosion and resulting fire.