

Statement of Mayor Daniel Rivera in front of The Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation 11/26/2018

Pipeline Safety in the MV: Incident Prevention & Response Field Hearing

Good morning senators and invited guests and fellow affected citizens. The gas fires and explosions of September 13th, 2018 and the days that followed was both a human tragedy and a human disaster. That tragedy continues despite the best efforts of Columbia Gas and the recovery effort. I never thought that I would have to ask people in my community and those in surrounding communities to evacuate the city, fearing for their lives. Asking them to abandon their homes, their businesses and their neighborhoods because no one knew if it was safe for them to be there; others evacuated out of sheer panic. We had to cut the power to every domicile and business in South Lawrence, Andover and North Andover in the middle of the night. What followed the devastations of the fires and explosions was loss of life, grave, unbearable injury to people, priceless loss to property and the regional economy, loss of business and jobs. But worst of all we lost the underlying security that the very thing most of us relied on to keep ourselves and our families warm in the coldest of New England winters could destroy our homes, our neighborhoods, our towns and city, our very peace. We expected that the gas services that we pay good money for every month, that many families sacrifice to make those monthly payments and that business owners based the core of their business and their livelihood on, would not put us in grave danger, but that is exactly what happened.

During the heart of the disaster Columbia gas was the least informed and last to act. It is Important to know that while we were trying to save lives and make heads or tails of the tragedy and disaster of those days Columbia gas was failing to manage the disaster, in the same way that they had failed to maintain their gas lines. I beat most of the upper echelon leadership to the scene after driving in Thursday night traffic from Boston. It was clear that the Columbia Gas engineers and Columbia Gas Massachusetts top leadership were afraid and lacked a clear path to deal with the disaster. They owned the pipe, owned the gas in the pipe, they owned the customer relationships, yet they failed to own this disaster. So much so that Governor Baker had to call for a state of emergency and put a different utility company in charge. We lost critical hours that first weekend,

getting people back in their homes because they refused to call for mutual aid motivated by what appeared to many to be an unwillingness to bear the cost of that mutual aid. One person is dead, many injured the core of three communities has been shaken. It appeared to many of us that Columbia Gas did not have an actual plan for dealing with a disaster of this magnitude; as if it never crossed their minds that this could occur. It should be mandated across utilities (not just natural gas) for there to be a system failure and customer evacuation plan created and refreshed every 2 years. People have plans to get out of their homes in case of a fire. Utilities should have a basic plan if they set your city or town on fire.

It is cold outside today and there is snow on the ground. People in our communities are still without heat and hot water. Some people are still in hotel rooms and RVs. Some are still cooking on hotplates. And most of the people in the affected area, regardless if they were lit before Thanksgiving or not, did not have the Thanksgiving they wanted to due to this disaster. The recovery is a material effort; fixing things and systems so that life can happen, in that sense the recovery is an awful experience only made better every day for some who get their gas turned back on.

Thanks to Governor Baker we have Chief Recovery Officer, Joe Albanese, leading the recovery effort. A twenty-eight-year veteran and former Captain in the United States Navy Civil Engineer Corps. We are honored to have Joe leading our restoration efforts and he enjoys our full support and appreciation for walking away from his business to work on this recovery. Every day he has done all he could to get Columbia Gas to live up to their responsibility and get the work done. As I have lived it, the recovery has really been about 4 things 1. Fixing the pipe in the Street and to the House to get gas to the house, 2. Fixing the pipe and appliances in the house to turn on the gas, 3. making people whole as customers of Columbia Gas for the physical loss but also for the mental anguish and terrifying experiences they had to endure and 4. Supporting people as they waited for 1, 2, and 3 to be complete.

Columbia Gas did accomplish the work of fixing the pipe in the street ahead of schedule and without further disaster. For this we are thankful. However, the rest

of the work has been miserable. Anytime the recovery has had to deal with the plight and need of people Columbia Gas has initially failed only getting it right days and sometimes weeks after local and state officials have raised the pressure so much that they had to relent. The plight of people and their suffering has been prolonged because of a broken claims process, a broken repair process and a total lack of understanding of how to communicate with customers. Long before we had 250 houses a day lit with gas, we had weeks of only 40 homes lit per day. For this not only does Columbia Gas but Gilbane Recovery Services, bear responsibility and as such should be investigated. Before we had days of 100 appliances delivered we had days with none. For almost a week, securing temporary housing was not only daunting, but nearly impossible. Customers were lied to about availability of hotels and RVs and consistently left in the dark on their claims processes. All the while hotel rooms and RVs sat empty. Having to endure not 1, not 2 but as many as 5 assessments of their homes and appliances before one wrench was turned to fix one boiler. Many times people languished without answers to important questions about when should they stay home from work to accommodate Columbia Gas and GRS contractors, and when can they expect answer regarding their claims. All the while, people were sleeping in cold beds and cooking on hot plates and taking cold showers. Families huddled in RV's and far away hotel rooms waiting for their homes to be fixed.

I am not sure what would have happened to our communities if not for the firefighters of the Lawrence, Andover, North Andover fire departments and the over 1,000 firefighters that came in support of them including the State Fire Marshal's office. The effect of this disaster was controlled only by the professional posture and response of the Lawrence, Andover, North Andover police departments and the over 1,000 police officers from across the commonwealth and the State Police. All the municipal employees that put down their city and town bureaucracies and became an army of first responders, aid and humanitarian workers, from the city councilors and selectmen to the library director, from state representative to the teachers and staff at our public schools (many affected themselves). The Governor and his staff and cabinet, who seamlessly rolled up their sleeves and became an active, important part of these efforts, the State legislature and the federal delegation both made us feel as if our plight was the

most important business before the commonwealth. I have never been more proud to be associated with a group of people in my life. They all showed the spirit of government and its power to do good. I must say that the rank and file Columbia Gas workers and zone captains and the workers who fixed the pipe in the street all were a shining spots in this ordeal. Zone captains became a symbol of the good Columbia Gas could do if it got it stuff together.

The recovery in the personal and communal sense for every person affected is going to take some time not measured in days or weeks. I am not sure when we will remove from our memories the darkness, the fire, the cold nights, the cold showers or the evacuations. So, in the end we will need help from state and federal officials and government to pave our roads, to fix our infrastructure, to pay for economic development, basic help to get off the mat after being knock down by Columbia Gas.

But what we all expect from you, what we ask of you, is to do what is at the core of why we have governments, and that is to protect us and to insure this can't and won't happen again. In this one incident, Columbia Gas showed they could not provide the service they promised everyone safely. This failure alone should cause that you should take their privilege to run a gas company away. Break it apart revoke their license make them sell their business to someone else, it doesn't matter how, but like Leonel Rondon's life was taken, and multiple homes no longer exist, and our lives and livelihood has forever been altered, Columbia Gas as a company should no longer exist. That is what justice for everyone affected would look like.