

**U. S. Senate Subcommittee on Surface Transportation and Merchant  
Marine Infrastructure, Safety and Security**

**“Pipeline Safety: Assessing the San Bruno, California Explosion and Other  
Recent Accidents”**

**Testimony of Jim Ruane, Mayor  
City of San Bruno, California  
September 28, 2010**

Thank you Chairman Lautenberg, Ranking Member Thune, our esteemed U.S. Senator Barbara Boxer and members of the Subcommittee for inviting me to testify on the matter of “Pipeline Safety: Assessing the San Bruno Explosion.” My name is Jim Ruane, and I am the proud Mayor of the wonderful City of San Bruno, California.

I am here today to give voice to the residents of San Bruno whose hearts were broken on the awful evening of September 9, 2010, but whose spirit remains strong and resilient. We are a determined town that will triumph over this tragedy because of the special sense of family, neighborhood and community that San Bruno was known for long before this tragic incident. I can tell you with great certainty that the explosion did not tear San Bruno apart but has brought us closer together than ever.

**A place called San Bruno**

Let me tell you a little bit about San Bruno. We are a solid working-class community of nearly 44,000 located, as one newspaper article said, “between the glitz of San Francisco and the wealth of Silicon Valley.” While we are located in the sophisticated urban environment of the San Francisco Peninsula, immediately adjacent to the San Francisco International Airport, we have a unique identity in the region as a somewhat old-fashioned, unassuming community with a positive, can-do attitude about life.

Most of our homes were built post-World War II, with one-car garages and well-kept yards. We have many beautiful parks in our town, and a community event almost every weekend. We have decorum at our City Council meetings, pride in the American flag and a legacy of civility in an increasingly uncivil world.

I often tell people that San Bruno is the closest to a slice of “American pie” that you could ever experience.

The Glenview area where the explosion occurred is a hillside neighborhood of nearly 400 homes built around the Crestmoor Canyon Open Space and the little Glenview Tot Lot popular with local families with small children.

## **The night of September 9, 2010**

The explosion occurred at dinnertime on a Thursday evening, just as residents were settling in for another typical night at home and perhaps to watch the first NFL game of the season. The neighborhood was shaken out of its routine with a thunderous disturbance that some mistook at first for an earthquake or an airplane crash. The deafening sound of a fireball roaring 100-feet overhead and 2,000-degree flames overtook the homes. Our residents ran for their lives with just the clothes on their back.

As one resident said, “My wife and children ran screaming barefoot from the house...with a ball of fire behind them.”

What we now know is that a 30-inch Pacific Gas & Electric Co. high-pressure natural gas transmission line running through the Glenview neighborhood exploded. Police and fire first-responders from all over our region converged on the area, only to discover that the explosion had knocked out the main water line. I myself, who saw the first plumes of smoke as I was driving home from a city reception, immediately drove to the scene and then helplessly watched from afar as the gas line spewed unabated for over an hour until it could be capped.

One observer later said, “It looked like hell on Earth.”

## **The response**

More than 400 first-responders gallantly battled the six-alarm inferno by dragging 3,000 feet of fire lines from an adjoining neighborhood where our water department was able to locate water. The heat was so intense it cracked the windshield of one fire truck, with the wall of fire stopping veteran responders in their tracks. As the fire spread rapidly into the adjacent Crestmoor Canyon, air strike teams sprayed fire retardant foam to prevent the fire from engulfing the canyon and the neighborhoods on the other side. Citizen-responders drove those with second-degree burns to nearby hospitals so that emergency crews could focus on the most severely burned and on preventing more lives from being lost.

Within the first hour of the explosion being reported, we had set up an incident command center at the site, evacuated nearly 1,000 residences and activated our emergency operations center at City Hall. Our city has a staff of only about 75 police and fire officers. Fortunately, we received a flood of assistance not only from our own city workers, but our residents, San Mateo County and state emergency officials, dozens of surrounding police and fire agencies, and relief agencies.

We opened an evacuation center for displaced residents that night, had a one-stop local assistance center up and running by the next day and soon were inspecting the 377 impacted homes in the Glenview neighborhood for damage. Some have said our response was a “textbook” example of how to handle a crisis of epic size like this –

and I just want to say that it was a team effort involving the tremendous expertise and passion of so many people and agencies coming together to support San Bruno.

We now know that the most devastating outcome of the explosion and fire was the loss of seven lives that night:

- A 44-year-old mother and her 13-year-old daughter, leaving behind a father and another daughter;
- An 81-year-old woman who was a longtime resident of the Glenview neighborhood;
- A 20-year-old woman who was visiting her boyfriend during her short break from work and whose boyfriend remains hospitalized with critical burn injuries;
- And nearly an entire household with an 82-year-old grandmother, a 50-year-old husband and 17-year-old son survived by the mother and daughter of the household.

There were other awful consequences as well:

- 66 persons were reported burned and injured including four firefighters who suffered smoke inhalation. At least 4 residents remain in critical condition today from their burns, and they face long and difficult recoveries.
- Thirty-seven homes were destroyed, 18 remain uninhabitable and another 33 suffered less serious damage.
- A large crater and dirt road now cut through Glenview, with a fence surrounding the exposed pipeline. The sad rubble of a children's playground and the dozens of charred homes and their barren chimneys sit as a grim reminder of the tragedy we experienced.

## **The aftermath**

The City moved quickly to help our displaced and frightened residents, staffing a special 24-hour hotline and reaching out with one-on-one assistance. Within 48 hours of the explosion, teams of building inspectors had completed inspection of the 377 evacuated homes in the 10-acre blast zone. That Saturday we convened a Town Hall meeting that drew over 600 residents.

By Sunday morning, less than 72 hours from the explosion, we had coordinated a neighborhood re-entry program that allowed 299 families to return home. Over the next few days those who lost their homes were allowed to return and sift through the rubble for any personal items they could find. We dealt with the deluge of national and international interest by setting up a 24-hour public information line and posting daily updates on the city website.

The following days were surreal for our community – funerals and vigils, church potlucks, fundraising events, press conferences and a nationwide offering of condolences. People from as far away as Kansas and Arkansas, Japan and Australia and others across the world contacted us to lend their support. While this became an international news story about pipeline safety, for us it always was about getting our hometown, San Bruno, back on its feet.

Today our recovery efforts continue, with crews now clearing the site of debris so that the rebuilding process can begin. We are having regular meetings with those still displaced, and this week we are beginning a new program to give even more targeted, one-on-one assistance to those 55 families who will be displaced from their homes and their neighborhood for some time to come.

We will leave it to the experts including investigators from the National Transportation Safety Board to determine how and why this happened. These investigations will be vital to ensuring that this type of tragedy never occurs again and that no other community will be subjected to the horror that we continue to experience.

For now we only know that this incident cost precious lives, incinerated a neighborhood, caused over \$50 million in physical damages and counting, and forever changed San Bruno.

I have been asked countless times what the impact has been, and I can only say that it's made a determined and resilient town even more determined and more resilient. San Bruno will honor those who have lost their lives, lost their homes and lost their way by rebuilding Glenview. That's just how it is in San Bruno, California.

As one retired firefighter who lost his home in the blaze said, "I'm going to be the first person to move back in, with the city help, of course. The faster I can move forward, the less I think of the past."

And as our City Manager said, "This incident will not define San Bruno. San Bruno will define the incident and our future."

Thank you for your time today, and thank you for your prayers for San Bruno.