

The Philadelphia Inquirer

November 6, 2004

New rules proposed for home gas meters

**The plan would require utilities to make safety improvements.
An explosion in Mount Laurel in 2003 spurred state action.**

By Rusty Pray

Nearly two years after an explosion caused by a ruptured meter ripped through a Mount Laurel neighborhood, the state Division of Consumer Affairs has proposed regulations that would require gas utilities to provide safety enhancements to meters situated within three feet of a driveway.

The regulations would govern meters on existing and new homes. They also would require gas companies to be held liable for personal or property damage caused by ruptures of unprotected meters. In addition, the gas companies would have to give the Bureau of Public Utilities (BPU) the number and location of every unprotected residential gas meter.

The BPU itself has not proposed any new regulations, Dave McMillan, chief of its bureau of pipeline safety, said yesterday. But protecting the meters is the bureau's responsibility, he said, and the two agencies are "working hand in hand."

The discussion on regulations also includes gas companies, so the proposals could be modified. McMillan said the bureau hoped to have new rules in place by early next year and they were likely to be similar to the Division of Consumer Affairs plan.

The proposed regulations follow closely

the terms of a settlement in September of a class-action lawsuit against the Public Service Electric and Gas Co. (PSE&G) alleging that exposed natural-gas lines near driveways are hazardous. The suit was filed 20 months ago by lawyers Stephen P. DeNittis and Philip S. Fuoco after a driveway accident caused a meter to rupture and the resulting explosion did extensive damage.

"We're ecstatic," said Fuoco, who practices in Haddonfield. "We take 100 percent credit for the new regulations."

McMillan said that "a lot of it has been initiated from the Mount Laurel case, but this is something the board has been monitoring for years."

In February 2003, Patricia Gallos, 71, pulled her Mercury Sable into her driveway at 203 Carleton Lane in the Springwood Village section of Larchmont. She hit a patch of black ice, and her car skated into the gas meter attached to the garage near the door.

A pipe that fed natural gas into her home ruptured, and the resulting explosion and fire leveled three townhouses, damaged 24, and knocked knickknacks off shelves a quarter-mile away. No one was hurt.

Under the DCA's proposals, gas companies would be required to install excess-flow valves on the meters or protective barriers in front of them at their expense. The valves shut off the gas when the line is severed.

Karen Johnson, a PSE&G spokeswoman, said her company was "working through the issues" with the state agencies. "We have been in discussions on determining the appropriate rules," she said.

In the September settlement, PSE&G agreed to install excess-flow valves or concrete bollards at 2,800 gas meters installed three feet or closer to a garage or driveway. Johnson said the estimate reflected exposed meters in the company's entire territory, not just Mount Laurel. She declined to estimate a cost.

PSE&G serves 75 percent of the state and has 1.6 million meters, of which about 640,000 are outdoors and residential.

Joanne Brigandi, a spokeswoman for South Jersey Gas, said the company was "ready and willing to comply with whatever the BPU ultimately determines is the appropriate standard of safety."

South Jersey Gas is being sued in a case similar to the PSE&G lawsuit.

Brigandi said the utility was surveying its meters but had not determined how many are exposed and within three feet of a driveway. South Jersey Gas serves more than 300,000 customers in Atlantic, Cumberland, Cape May, Salem, Camden, Burlington and Gloucester Counties.

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