

Wellesley Natural Resources Commission: Working to Address Gas Leaks (March 2019)

For the past two years, members of the Wellesley Natural Resources Commission have been working to address the persistent problem of gas leaks in our town. There are at least 16,000 gas leaks across Massachusetts and we have at least 200 leaks here in Wellesley due to aging and deteriorating gas pipelines. The gas companies are solely responsible for the repair and maintenance of gas infrastructure and progress has been frustratingly slow.

The problem of gas leaks is complex and defies simple solutions, but we are hopeful that the strong partnerships we have developed over many months with other boards, other towns, legislators, and organizations will produce results in the coming year. Meanwhile, the recent catastrophic explosions in the Merrimack Valley (caused by accidental overpressurization) have resulted in statewide efforts to consider how Massachusetts might start a transition away from methane gas to other sources of energy.

Why do we care about gas leaks?

- **Gas leaks contribute to global warming.**
 - Natural gas consists primarily of methane, known to be one of the most destructive chemicals implicated in global warming.
 - Methane makes up about 10% of the greenhouse gas emissions in our state.
 - Methane leaks undermine our efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions through efficiency and conservation.
- **Gas leaks are dangerous.** Under certain conditions, gas leaks can result in explosions, although gas companies work hard to identify and urgently repair any potentially explosive leak.
- **Gas leaks are harmful to human health.** We breathe in the methane and chemical components of the leaking gas, resulting in asthma and other respiratory illnesses.
- **Gas leaks cost us money.** As ratepayers, we are all paying for lost gas every month on our bills.
- **Gas leaks kill our trees and other plants.** Methane in the soil takes the place of oxygen that trees and plants need, essentially suffocating them.

What is the NRC doing about gas leaks?

- **Informing the public and building awareness:** In March 2017, the NRC organized a [public forum](#) with experts to educate the community about the extent and seriousness of gas leaks in Wellesley. We partnered with Sustainable Wellesley to tag 200 leaks in town to promote the forum and to make sure residents knew about nearby leaks.
- **Understanding the problem:** In July 2017, the NRC commissioned an independent study by Gas Leaks Inc. to better understand the extent of the gas leaks in town. [Click here to see the mapped results along with the data from National Grid.](#)
- **Working to address leaks near schools:** The NRC alerted the School Committee to the presence of gas leaks near a number of schools, preschools,

and daycare centers ([click here for maps](#)). At the request of the NRC, the School Committee contacted National Grid. (Gas companies are required to repair any leaks within 50 feet of a school zone.) Due to the recent lockout of National Grid workers, progress on leak repair has been even slower than usual.

- **Working with statewide Gas Leaks Allies:** For more than a year, the NRC has been working with a coalition of organizations known as the Gas Leaks Allies who are developing legislation and regulatory reforms to speed progress and to identify and repair large volume gas leaks. The NRC has joined these efforts, met with legislators, and testified at the State House and Department of Public Utilities.
 - [Click here for the NRC's December 2018 testimony](#) to the State Legislature's Joint Committee on Telecommunications, Utilities, and Energy
 - [Click here for the NRC's October 2017 testimony](#) to the Department of Public Utilities.
- **Acting to protect public shade trees:** In 2018, the NRC requested and received Community Preservation Act funding to purchase a gas leak detection device (combustible gas indicator) to be used by NRC staff and the Department of Public Works to keep *new* trees from being planted near gas leaks, as well as to begin to collect data around trees suspected of dying from gas leaks. (Other towns have attempted to hold National Grid liable for tree deaths with very limited success.)
- **Joining with other towns to approach National Grid:** Since October 2018, the NRC has been participating in a discussion about gas leaks with other towns in National Grid territory, organized by the Metropolitan Area Planning Council, Mothers Out Front, and HEET. In late January 2019, 17 cities and towns (including the Wellesley Board of Selectmen at the request of the NRC) sent a letter to National Grid requesting a meeting to discuss issues of common concern regarding the repair of large volume gas leaks. The group is currently working with National Grid to arrange that meeting.