

# Gas Utility Fined over Fatal Blast

PETER JACKSON, Associated Press

HARRISBURG, Pa. (AP) — Utility regulators voted on Thursday to fine Pennsylvania's largest gas utility \$500,000 for a 2011 natural gas explosion that killed five people in Allentown and called the company's safety record "downright alarming."

The Public Utility Commission unanimously approved modifications to a settlement with UGI Corp. that boosted the civil fine from \$386,000 to the maximum allowed by law at the time of the explosion.

The settlement also requires the Reading, Pa.-based company to replace all its cast iron pipelines within 14 years and to expand and enhance its testing and monitoring programs.

The thunderous blast, which was traced to a crack in a cast iron gas main, killed five people, flattened a pair of rowhouses and set fire to a block of homes late one night in February 2011. Utility workers toiled for five hours to punch through ice, asphalt and concrete and seal the 12-inch main with foam to stop the flow of gas.

In their joint motion to modify the settlement, PUC Chairman Robert Powelson and Vice Chairman John Coleman said UGI's record of safety compliance is "patently unacceptable."

"This is the eighth time in slightly more than four years that this commission has adjudicated a matter containing allegations of gas safety violations by a UGI-owned gas distribution utility," they said. "This goes beyond cause for concern; it is downright alarming."

UGI said it was reviewing the commission's order and that it had accelerated the replacement of gas pipelines made of cast iron and bare steel with new lines made of high-density plastic and coated steel.

"UGI plans to continue to work collaboratively with the PUC to ensure the safe delivery of energy to UGI's customers, and the many communities it serves," the company said.

If the utility objects to the settlement, it will be referred to an administrative law judge, the PUC said.

The maximum fine was increased to \$2 million last year, which is in line with federal regulations, said PUC spokeswoman Jennifer Kocher.

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