Subcontractor in Deadly Gas Line Blast Lacked Permit

HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH,Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. (AP) — A cable company subcontractor suspected of rupturing a natural gas line before a deadly Kansas City restaurant explosion didn't have an approved permit for the work, city officials said Monday.

Pat Klein, assistant city manager, said excavating without a permit is violation of the municipal code, and can result in a fine of $500, up to six months in jail or both. He said no charge had been filed.

"The city will decide what they are going to do," Klein said. "At this point, all the resources are going toward the fire investigation and the impending snow."

A Missouri Gas Energy official said previously that Heartland Midwest reported hitting a natural gas line with an underground borer more than an hour before Tuesday night's explosion. The blast and ensuing fire leveled JJ's restaurant near a busy outdoor shopping area called the Country Club Plaza. One person was killed and 15 others were injured.

The next day, Heartland Midwest sought a permit and asked that it take effect retroactively, Klein said.

"Honestly, it's kind of surprising to me," Klein said. "Getting one after the fact isn't what's supposed to be done."

Brad Russell, a lawyer for Heartland Midwest, didn't immediately return a phone call seeking comment Monday. The company released a statement last week expressing sympathy for the victims and saying the company is cooperating with authorities. "We are reserving any public comment until the completion of a thorough investigation," the statement concluded.

Four of the injured remained hospitalized Monday at the University of Kansas Hospital — one in critical condition, two in fair condition and one in good condition.

Hours before the explosion, witnesses reported a strong smell of gas. But no one alerted the fire department or utility officials to the possibility of a leak until the subcontractor called 911 shortly before 5 p.m. Tuesday to report having ruptured the gas pipe, Mayor Sly James has said.

Within 20 minutes, a worker for Missouri Gas Energy arrived at the scene, followed later by a backhoe to dig a hole that would allow the gas to vent into the air, MGE Chief Operating Officer Rob Hack said.

Those who remained in the restaurant were urged to leave, Hack said. Then about 6 p.m., something inside the restaurant ignited the fuel, authorities said.

Surveillance video from a nearby travel agency shows a fireball erupting from the restaurant's roof, showering the street with debris and throwing up a cloud of dust and smoke. The blast could be felt for a mile and shattered glass in neighboring buildings.

The Missouri Public Service Commission, which oversees utilities, said preliminary information indicates that gas pipelines had been properly marked. The commission and fire officials continue to investigate.

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