

Natural gas explosion kills 5 in Eastern Pennsylvania

James Brewer
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At least five residents, including a four-month-old infant and a 79-year-old man, were killed in a natural gas explosion in their Allentown, Pennsylvania neighborhood at 11 p.m. on Wednesday. Eight homes were completely destroyed in the blast, including two that were leveled in the initial explosion. In total, 47 properties were damaged, including 10 businesses.

Hundreds were evacuated from their homes as a result of the ensuing fire. According to local news reports, six busloads of evacuees were brought to a Red Cross “comfort center” set up at the Allentown Fairgrounds. This included a large number of residents of the Gross Towers Senior Center, many of whom were in wheelchairs, walkers or were in other ways disabled.

Causes for the blast were still under investigation last night. Allentown Police Captain George Medero told Reuters, “Preliminary indications look like it was a gas explosion that resulted in an explosion and a fire.”

Gas to the area was shut off at around 3:45 a.m. yesterday. Local gas mains used in the area are not typically equipped with emergency safety valves to seal off the flow of gas, according to press statements by local utilities. Utility workers shut off the gas flow by cutting through the pavement to access gas lines and inserting foam into the gas mains.

Houses burned for hours before most of those evacuated were allowed to return to their homes. Firefighters attributed the difficulty in containing the blaze to the frigid weather, which made digging through ice and reinforced concrete to get to the gas

line extremely slow. As the gas was still leaking, they allowed the venting gas to burn in order to dissipate it.

The explosion centered on the 500 block of 13th Street. Antonio Arroyo, whose home was burned in the fire resulting from the blast, was interviewed by local news. “I thought we were under attack,” he said. He ran outside and saw a fireball raging in the place where a house once stood. “What I saw, I couldn’t believe.”

Arroyo and his wife escaped the burning house with only the clothes on their backs. “What we have with us is everything we have,” he told reporters. “We have no renters’ insurance so that everything that’s lost is lost. We just have to start over again.”

The utility company responsible for the gas line is UGI Utilities, based in Reading, Pennsylvania. Joseph Swope, a spokesman for UGI said, “It certainly appears to be a natural gas explosion, but we haven’t been able to identify the leak yet.”

He claimed that the company had checked the gas main within the last several weeks and found no problems with it. He said there were no complaints of gas odors.

“We don’t know what happened. It’s going to take some time to figure out,” Swope said.

According to Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission spokesperson Jennifer Kocher, the agency is conducting an investigation of the incident.

Allentown is the largest city in the Eastern Pennsylvania region known as the Lehigh Valley. It is about 65 miles from the site of a gas explosion in

Philadelphia three weeks earlier. That explosion took the life of a utility worker and critically injured three more.

Such accidents reflect the lack of proper upkeep and infrastructure investment common to many US cities, particularly in the old Rust Belt industrial areas of the northeast.

Allentown in particular has been physically and financially devastated by deindustrialization—even becoming the subject of a well-known 1982 song, “Allentown,” by popular musician Billy Joel. It was a major center of the silk industry until after World War II and the heavy vehicle maker Mack Truck, owned by French automaker Renault, closed down its Allentown headquarters in 2008 and moved to North Carolina.

The most devastating blow came with the collapse of the region’s steel industry in the early 1980s. Bethlehem Steel finally closed its nearby steel works in 1995 after nearly 140 years of production and then, in 2003 filed for bankruptcy, robbing tens of thousands of retirees of their full retirement benefits. (See: US: Bethlehem Steel to terminate health and insurance benefits for 95,000 retirees.)

The city has a history of major gas explosions, according to the local WFMZ radio station. Two explosions in 1976 killed two Allentown firefighters; the 1994 Gross Towers blast killed one and injured 80; a 2006 gas explosion leveled three homes; in 2008, a gas leak leveled another home, though its two occupants remarkably survived the blast.



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