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Politicians, residents frustrated over gas company's public response



SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

A frustrated crowd of Columbia Gas customers gathered around a gas representative on Main Street and had few of their questions answered in North Andover.

By [Matt Rocheleau](#), [Milton J. Valencia](#) and [David Abel](#)

GLOBE STAFF SEPTEMBER 14, 2018

NORTH ANDOVER — The public response by [Columbia Gas](#) has earned some bad early reviews in the first 20 hours after dozens of [explosions and fires](#) fueled by [the company's natural gas lines](#) rocked the Merrimack Valley Thursday night.

Massachusetts US Representative Seth Moulton, whose district includes North Andover and parts of

Andover, [took to Twitter](#) to vent about being unable to get in touch with leaders at Columbia Gas.

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“Got the number of the Columbia Gas president and have tried him multiple times with no answer. Everyone wants answers. And we deserve them,” Moulton tweeted late Thursday night.

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As of 10 a.m. Friday, Moulton had still not made contact with company officials, a spokesman for the congressman said.

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Massachusetts US Senators Elizabeth Warren and Edward Markey were also demanding answers, issuing a statement calling for a congressional hearing on the incident.

A spokeswoman for Markey said he spoke with a Columbia Gas executive by phone Thursday night briefly, but received virtually no information. Markey got little additional information Friday when he met with company officials on the ground, the spokeswoman said.

In North Andover, residents who had waited for more than an hour for Columbia Gas representatives to show up to give a briefing, as promised by the town manager,

were frustrated when the representatives showed up late and had no answers.

At one point, the two representatives hustled back to their cars after getting peppered with questions.

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Chris Allen of Belmont Street expressed frustration.

“I have no idea whether we can move into our house or not. Is it safe?” Allen said. “It’s just the unknown.”

James Hassam of Waverly Road said he, too, showed up expecting answers a day after fires broke out on his road.

“I really think you should have come here with more information,” he told a representative.

“We don’t have answers right now,” responded the representative, who would not give her name.

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“So you’re saying it’s not safe to go back into our home,” another person said.

Hassam told a reporter: “When you come here and you try to get answers they don’t have, it’s unsettling.”

Mike Foresta of the Connell & Foresta law firm said he was losing business because of the uncertainty. He said his office had electricity, but he didn’t know whether he was allowed to open. The representatives didn’t know either.

“It appears as though I could open because I have power, but they don’t have the answers,” he said.

It will be a slow return to normalcy after the fires Thursday





Reporters asked Kurt Schwartz, director of the Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency, at a morning news conference why company officials had not appeared at news conferences between Thursday and Friday morning.

“You’re going to hear from them today,” Schwartz reassured them.

The company has released several statements on its website, offering its sympathies to affected residents. None of them have said what the company believes happened or offered an apology. One said, “We are working with the appropriate authorities to investigate this incident in order to understand its cause.”

When a Globe reporter expressed his frustration with lack of information coming from Columbia, Ken Stammen, a spokesman for the company, called Friday morning and said, “I totally understand your frustration. We’re trying to make sure folks are safe. We’re cooperating with various sources. We don’t know the cause, and we can’t speculate.”

Stammen said it was too early to say whether overpressurization of gas lines was the cause.

Governor Charlie Baker on Thursday night paused a beat before [calling](#) the company’s response “adequate.”

“The grade so far is incomplete,” Baker added.

Got the number of the Columbia Gas president and have tried him multiple times with no answer. Everyone wants answers. And we deserve them.

— Seth Moulton (@sethmoulton) [September 14, 2018](#)

I am in No. Andover and Columbia gas reps just ran away from residents who were bombarding them with questions they didn’t know the answers to.

— Milton Valencia (@MiltonValencia) [September 14, 2018](#)

Business and homeowners in N. Andover understandably upset w/Columbia Gas reps who showed up more than a hour late for meeting and left w/out giving any real info to them [#Boston25 pic.twitter.com/BsHbblTeTq](#)

— Ted Daniel (@tvnewzted) [September 14, 2018](#)

Representative from Columbia Gas has arrived in North Andover to speak with residents.

Feeling among some after speaking with the rep is frustration. They ?are not getting answers...are just as confused now as they’ve been all along.? [#Boston25](#)

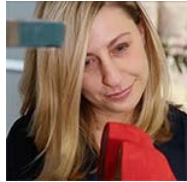
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— Capturegirl (@jenyp) [September 14, 2018](#)

Steve Annear and Martin Finucane of the Globe staff contributed to this report. Matt Rocheleau can be reached at matthew.rocheleau@globe.com. Follow him on Twitter [@mrochele](#)

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