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Gas service could take 'several months' to restore in Merrimack Valley



JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

Gas workers tended to pipes off Brookfield Street in South Lawrence.

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

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NORTH ANDOVER — Columbia Gas said Thursday that restoration of gas service across the Merrimack Valley could take “several months,” a dark new prediction for local business owners and residents as frustrations continue to grow with the company amid uncertainty over the future.

“We are just getting so many [different] answers, I don’t know exactly how we will be affected,” said

Shahram Naghibi, owner of the Chama Grill on Main Street. While his restaurant has no gas, it has served as the location for a meeting between Governor Charlie Baker, Town Manager Andrew W. Maylor, and dozens of business owners who have gone without service since last week's gas fires and explosions rocked communities in North Andover, Andover, and Lawrence.

Naghibi said he has to decide whether to convert to propane gas, a costly endeavor, or wait out the restoration of service.

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"It would come out of my own pocket, but the whole goal is getting back into business," he said. "It doesn't look like we will be opening soon."

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More than 8,600 gas customers could go without service entering the winter months, as Columbia Gas finalizes plans to replace the 48-mile cast-iron pipeline system in those areas. The company's [fast-tracked strategy has unnerved experts](#), who called it an ambitious project that could jeopardize public safety. Across South Lawrence on Thursday, Columbia Gas crews and subcontractors could be seen digging up streets as construction begins, the gas utility announced.

On Thursday, Baker said state officials have been involved in the planning process to make sure that properly qualified workers will be in place, and that they set an appropriate deadline to restore service as soon as possible. He did not address Columbia's prediction — posted as an update for residents [on the company's website](#) — that it could take "several months for those on the system directly impacted by the incident." The company initially said it could take weeks to restore service, although it had not set an official timeline.

"We want to make sure the process is a timely but reliable one," the governor said. "It needs to be brisk, but it's got to be done by credentialed and certified people, who have had experience doing this kind of work before, so you don't have to worry about the safety question."

The work will include checking systems inside houses and businesses, as well as the infrastructure outside, he said.

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The governor would not say what workers would be involved, saying that information would be in a plan that is slated to be released Friday.

More than 80 homes were damaged by fires and explosions last week. One person was killed in a home explosion, and dozens of others were injured.

The National Transportation Safety Board is investigating the cause of the explosions, though over pressurization is suspected. Pressure was flowing through the pipes at 12 times the normal rate, according to a preliminary review.

Baker said federal authorities remain in charge of the investigation. "What we're doing is giving them access to anything they're looking for."

An NTSB spokesman said Thursday investigators "have not reached any conclusions." He said, based on the timeline of past pipeline investigations, it may be weeks before even preliminary findings of the probe are announced.

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In the meantime, residents have attempted to return to normalcy. Raymond Gonzalez, owner of Coco Rays taqueria in South Lawrence, who said he lost thousands of dollars in spoiled food when his electricity was shut off, was able to reopen and business was returning Thursday. While Gonzalez has gas, his neighbors do not, and he was offering discounts to locals and residents in shelters.

"I see a big hole right now in South Lawrence, it's not complete," he said. "It feels too empty."

In Andover, the town set up outside showers with hot water for residents without water heaters.

Columbia Gas has set up claims centers to help residents and business owners cover immediate losses, though the governor has set up a Greater Lawrence Disaster Relief Fund in partnership with local community groups to help sustain residents and businesses. Baker said more than 500 businesses could be affected.

"Our small businesses, our local businesses, are really the lifeline for so many things," said Maylor, the North Andover town manager.

"One of the real challenges right now for businesses and residents is the uncertainty of not knowing what's next."

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