



Columbia Gas ordered to halt all work except for emergencies, Merrimack Valley



JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF/FILE

Columbia Gas president Steve Bryant (left) looked at the construction taking place in Lawrence last month.

By [Travis Andersen](#)

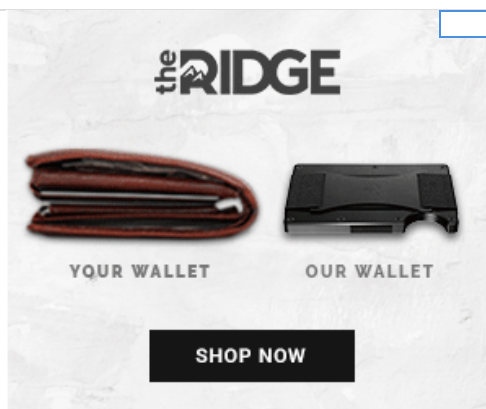
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The state Department of Public Utilities has ordered Columbia Gas of Massachusetts to “impose a moratorium on all work” except for emergency and compliance work, following the release of a preliminary [NTSB report](#) on the Sept. 13 explosions and gas fires in the Merrimack Valley.

The order will remain in effect at least through Dec. 1, officials said.

“Following the National Transportation Safety Board’s preliminary report and as a result of ongoing inspections of Columbia Gas’s gas system, the Department of Public Utilities . . . has ordered Columbia Gas to impose a moratorium on all work, except for emergency and compliance work, across the company’s entire service territory until at least December 1, 2018,” said Peter Lorenz, a spokesman for the state Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs, which oversees the DPU, in a statement.

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Lorenz said the “order will not impede the emergency restoration services in the Merrimack Valley and allows the DPU to approve additional work upon request by the company. Separately, the Department is in the process of hiring an Independent Evaluator to assess, out of an abundance of caution, the safety of pipeline infrastructure throughout Massachusetts.”

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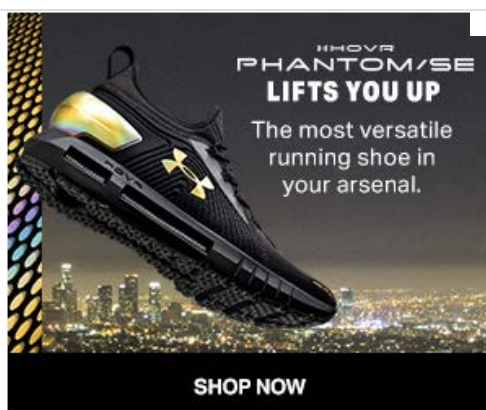
Dean Lieberman, a Columbia Gas of Massachusetts spokesman, acknowledged the utility had received the DPU letter and said the company would comply with the order.

“This does not impact the restoration efforts in the Merrimack Valley, or other compliance work across Columbia’s footprint,” he said in a Friday statement. “As always, we remain committed to the safety of our customers, our communities and our employees.”

Angela M. O’Connor, chair of the DPU, elaborated on the order in a letter sent Friday to Stephen Bryant, president of Columbia Gas of Massachusetts.

“In light of the NTSB’s preliminary report and to ensure a commitment to a safe distribution system, the Department hereby requires that, unless the Department explicitly approves other work, Columbia shall perform only emergency and required compliance work on the gas distribution system,” O’Connor wrote.

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She said “Columbia must provide each municipality in its service territory with daily notice of all planned work, with the exception of emergency restoration efforts in the Merrimack Valley. These directives will remain in place until December 1, 2018 and may, upon review, be extended or modified.”

The Sept. 13 blasts and fires killed one teenager and injured more than 20 other people, and thousands of homes and businesses were left without gas heat or hot water.

On Thursday, the NTSB released a preliminary report showing that Columbia failed to relocate an underground pressure sensor from an abandoned pipe during construction work in Lawrence, triggering a gush of gas into the local network that erupted into explosions and fires that rocked Lawrence, Andover, and North Andover.

Columbia Gas said in a statement following the NTSB report that it could not speculate or comment on the final cause of the disaster because the investigation is ongoing. But the utility noted it suspended all similar work and enhanced procedures for work on low-pressure systems after the disaster occurred.

“We saw these as responsible steps to take in the aftermath of the incident and while the facts were being gathered,” said Joe Hamrock, chief executive of NiSource Inc.

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State regulators on Oct. 8 also ordered National Grid to impose a moratorium on all work, except for emergency and compliance measures, pending the results of DPU’s review of National Grid’s safety practices, officials said. The DPU also required National Grid to have an inspector on location for all work that could lead to abnormal pressurization until this review is complete.

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Danny McDonald, Shelley Murphy, Milton J. Valencia, and Matt Rocheleau of the Globe Staff contributed to this report.

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