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## Balance Needed to Address Gas Line Concerns

By Mark Olbert  
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As we move into our second month since major safety concerns with **PG&E's** Line 147 were disclosed, it's important to take stock about what has happened, and what has not.

The good news for San Carlans is that this high pressure transmission line is no longer operating at high pressure. While PG&E has the right to move gas through it, courtesy of a ruling by Administrative Law Judge Maribeth Bushey of the California Public Utilities Commission, they must keep the pressure down to no more than 125 pounds per square inch. This reduces the risk of any flaws in the line causing a catastrophe.

Bushey also recommended the largest possible fine against PG&E for failing to disclose the now-infamous email thread in a timely manner, and for their attempt to sneak the information into the record through an "errata" filing. Memo to PG&E and its lawyers: "potentially sitting on a San Bruno situation" is not a typo.

On the other hand, there is clearly pressure on the regulatory process, not to mention PG&E, to re-up the pressure as winter approaches. This is an understandable, if uncomfortable, fact of life. Keeping our fellow Californians from shivering in their homes, or their hospitals, means some of us have to accept high pressure gas pipelines in our communities. Which is why we must know they're safe.

Timeline may be too short

The city's newly hired outside experts are busy reviewing all the safety and record keeping data on Line 147 they can get their hands on. But the regulatory review timeline strikes me as too rapid, probably because of cold weather concerns.

I don't see how new information is going to be developed and incorporated into the review before it ends.

If that happens, a decision to re-up pressure will have to be made based on existing data. Some of which is already known to be derived from incomplete or inconsistent records. Worse yet, some of it prompted a PG&E engineer to raise concerns that were presumably evaluated and apparently found unconvincing by PG&E a year ago. Speaking of that engineer's concerns, it bothers me that he or she has not been made available to talk to city staff or our outside experts. Early on when I asked the PUC whether they were going to do their own interview they weren't sure.

Fortunately, they've apparently decided to do one. But given that San Carlos lives and property are on the line, I want our own staff and experts to be able to talk to the PG&E engineer, to assess his or her concerns for ourselves.

Bias toward 'gas must flow'

During state Sen. Jerry Hill's hearing last month on PUC and PG&E transparency I noted there's a bias on PG&E's part that "the gas must flow." They are a profit-making company, and have to earn their living. Senator Hill

commented that the safety of our communities partly depends on an operating gas distribution system, and that PG&E employees believe safety is extremely important. I agree.

But as the San Bruno disaster unfortunately demonstrated, people and organizations make mistakes. While PG&E must distribute and deliver gas, and is striving mightily today to do so safely, it's the job of our regulatory agencies to ensure they operate in as safe a manner as possible. Competition between the perspectives of PG&E and the PUC - which Senator Hill correctly pointed out are not necessarily opposed - helps give us a balance between safety-from-having-gas-available and safety-from-not-having-pipelines-blow-up.

We need both. I'm cautiously encouraged by the evolution of the PUC's approach regarding Line 147. But we still have a way to go to achieve the right balance.

*Mark Olbert is a member of the San Carlos City Council. His opinions are his own, and do not necessarily reflect those of the city or its council.*