

Moving gas meters a matter of safety and show

By **Christopher Baxter, OF THE MORNING CALL**

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The city dwellers who cast aside perceptions of crime and urban decay to move to this historic district of downtown Allentown care more than most about the face of their community, and they have the charming brick facades and old-fashioned window shutters to prove it.

Just ask Edward Morrison, who picked garbage from a melting snow bank last week in front of 815 W. Gordon St. He came to Old Allentown six years ago and restored a 2 1/2-story row home, one piece of a living time capsule that stands out in a city vastly different from its early days.

"Character here means everything," Morrison said.

So two years ago, when the local utility company began upgrading gas lines on streets just outside the confines of the historic district, residents attuned to the tiniest of details took notice. Spider-like pipes and boxy gas meters, once hidden in basements, were showing up in front of homes.

Though none have yet to appear in Old Allentown — bounded by N. Hall Street to the east and N 12th Street to the west, W. Liberty Street to the north and roughly W. Linden Street to the south — the residents fear their prized district will be next.

"It really detracts from what we're trying to do in the neighborhoods," said Morrison, founder of Citizens for Appropriate Meter Placement, a committee of concerned residents. "When a utility comes around and says, 'We're doing this for your safety,' who's going to question them?"

In light of this month's gas explosion on the southwest corner of 13th and Allen streets, which killed five people and destroyed eight homes, homeowners across Allentown have a nagging uneasiness about the city's aging infrastructure and the instantaneous havoc it can wreak.

Utilities here and across the country, pressured to expedite upgrades, are using that work to justify the relocation of meters from inside homes to the outside. Hardly an aesthetic ideal, they admit, the move is necessary to keep new, higher-pressured gas lines from quickly filling a home in the case of a leak.

"We all have to recognize people are concerned about their property, property value and investment," said J. Michael Love, vice president of government affairs for UGI Utilities, which serves about 340,000 gas customers in Pennsylvania. "But we'd all agree to be concerned about safety as well."

Many urban areas are served by old, cast-iron pipes that carry low-pressure gas to customers. As utilities such as UGI replace those pipes — identical to the one thought to have caused the explosion Feb. 9 — they install

smaller, plastic lines that increase the gas pressure.

As a result, the companies must install a regulator and vent that lower the pressure before it enters a meter and flows into a home to service a stove or heater. Love said UGI is also installing outdoor equipment for any new gas customers.

The utilities say they have no choice but to move the equipment, a change they argue benefits the customer by eliminating a serious indoor threat, and by making the meters more readily available to workers who must perform mandated leak and corrosion surveys.

Those conveniences also happen to save companies a lot of time and money.

Morrison and other detractors of meter relocation, including those in other states, call the safety argument disingenuous. They note that moving the equipment outdoors opens it up to a whole host of new dangers, including ice, snow, corrosion, traffic and vandalism.

"All I'd have to do is walk up with a pair of pliers and I could do some serious mischief," said Morrison, walking past an outdoor meter set protruding from a porch. "We truly feel this is safer inside."

Utilities across the country acknowledge there is danger with outdoor meters. National Grid, which serves about 3.5 million customers in the Northeast, warns in news releases that the buildup of ice and snow around or over outdoor meters, regulators, pipes and vents poses a "serious safety risk."

This month, piles of snow on top of a National Grid gas meter in Billerica, Mass. cracked a pipe and caused a leak, forcing the evacuation of 29 residents, according to published reports. But despite the outdoor risks, National Grid's policy is to move meters to the outside of homes.

"We feel outside placement, net benefit, outweighs inside placement," spokesman David Graves said.

Problems, aesthetic and otherwise, are more pronounced in historic and urban areas such as Allentown, where utilities often have no option but to place a meter and its regulator in front of a building and along a busy street because there are no usable side or rear locations.

Mark McDonald, president of the New England Gas Workers Association, said regulators and vents connected to higher-pressure lines should be kept outside a home, even if that means in front. But the large meter boxes, he said, do not need to be outside.

"That's not a benefit for the customer," McDonald said. "That's for the company."

And that sparked complaints in 2008 from a group of homeowners in the historic Broadway-Armory neighborhood of Providence, R.I. Jessica Jennings, former board member of the West Broadway Neighborhood Association there, said the fight meant more than aesthetics.

"No one should be told by a utility company where they are going to put their big equipment, regardless if they are in a historic district or not," Jennings said. "It became a private property rights issue."

Rhode Island legislators in 2009 passed a law requiring gas utilities to consult with homeowners before moving a meter, something Jennings said had not been done in the past. The bill also bans meters or regulators in front of a home in a historic district without owners' consent.

Tom Yuracka of Allentown's West Park Historic District said it was pure luck that he was home to stop UGI from moving meters out in front of his two properties. His concern, beyond the historic districts, is that other people who care about their homes will not know to question the policy.

"It varies from house to house depending on how adamant the owner is," Yuracka said. "Anyone who's concerned about the appearance of their house would not want a meter plastered out front. And there's nothing that's convinced me one way or another that having the meter outside is safer."

Residents met with UGI and the Pennsylvania Utility Commission recently to complain that meter sets were being moved without homeowners' consent.

The utility agreed to consider alternatives to moving both the meter and the regulator outside in historic districts. For example, UGI said it may be able to move just the regulator outside and leave the meters inside. Mayor Ed Pawlowski said that compromise would do a lot to solve the problem.

But Morrison says that option should be available to every neighborhood, not just historic districts.

"It looks like urban blight," he said. "It's no different than all those satellite dishes on buildings."

Love, the spokesman for UGI, said the company also is considering much smaller meters that are new to the market. But at the same time he pledges flexibility, at least in historic areas, he said it's the company's position that residents really have no choice in the matter.

"Ultimately, this is going to be decided by the PUC," said Love, who noted that an audit by the commission criticized some utilities that had too many meters inside. "Right now our policy is to put the equipment outside."

The PUC has asked the state's 10 largest gas utilities for information on leaks related to inside meter sets as well as the number of inside and outside meters and regulators, spokeswoman Denise McCracken said. She declined to provide the information, saying it's proprietary.

Jennifer Kocher, another spokeswoman for PUC, said earlier this month that utilities reported more than 4,000 leaks on inside meter sets over a five-year period. But without more statistics, it is impossible to know what percentage of indoor meters that represents.

It also says nothing about the risks of indoor meters versus outdoor meters.

As it stands now, the commission requires meters be installed either inside the building in a dry, well-ventilated place not subject to excessive heat, and as near as possible to the point of entrance of the pipe supplying service to the building, or outside the building at a location selected by the utility.

The PUC is drafting new rules to further regulate the equipment's placement, McCracken said, and staff will take into consideration alternatives to relocating and replacing inside meter sets. She did not specify what options homeowners may have under the proposal.

Federal regulations require that meters and regulators, whether inside or outside a building, be installed in an accessible location protected from corrosion and other damage, including — if installed outside a building — damage that may be caused by vehicles.

Shane Fillman, member of the city's Historical Architectural Review Board, says UGI should worry more about replacing its old piping than moving meters. But because the regulation of gas utilities lies with the state, there's nothing the review board or even city officials can do but pressure UGI.

"It's very nauseating seeing how they've destroyed properties," Fillman said.

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BOTH SIDES NOW

The issue: Moving gas meters and regulators from inside homes to outside.

Gas companies and regulators say:

- Promotes safety by preventing a medium- or high-pressure line from leaking directly into a building.
- Saves money and time by allowing crews easy access to equipment for service and leak inspection.

Residents and historic preservationists say:

- No statistics prove that outdoor meters, exposed to different dangers, are safer than indoor meters.
- Relocation to the front of buildings in urban areas looks like blight and damages neighborhood character.

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