Time Bomb
How Atmos Energy’s natural gas keeps blowing up Texas homes

Category:
Local Reporting

Entry elements:
1. Time Bomb, Part 1
2. Time Bomb, Part 2 – Methodology, tally of destruction, legislators take action, how bad the problem is, warning signs

Contributors:
Staff Writers
Cary Aspinwall
Holly K. Hacker
Allan James Vestal
How Atmos Energy’s natural gas keeps blowing up Texas homes (while customers pay the tab)

By Cary Aspinwall and Holly K. Hacker

Published Sept. 23, 2018

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Atmos settles suits; customers pay

Texas energy giant Atmos Energy Corp. and a group of independent distributors and suppliers have announced a settlement agreement in a series of suits involving the natural gas pipeline company. The settlement, announced late last month, resolves a class-action lawsuit filed by customers who claimed they were overcharged for natural gas and other services. The settlement also includes a $50 million payment to the customers. The company also agreed to reduce its rates and improve its customer service in the future. The settlement is expected to be finalized within the next few months. The details of the settlement will be discussed in more detail in a future issue of The Dallas Morning News.

Atmos’ aging pipelines

The company has announced plans to replace its aging pipelines, which were installed in the 1960s and 1970s. The pipelines are made of cast iron and are vulnerable to leaks and corrosion. The company estimates that it will spend $3 billion over the next 10 years to replace the pipelines. The company has also announced plans to increase its customer service and improve its operational efficiency. The details of the plans will be discussed in more detail in a future issue of The Dallas Morning News.

500 miles of old iron pipe

The company has identified 500 miles of old iron pipe that are in need of replacement. The pipes are located in various areas of the state, including North Texas, East Texas, and West Texas. The company estimates that it will spend $1 billion to replace the pipes. The company has also announced plans to increase its customer service and improve its operational efficiency. The details of the plans will be discussed in more detail in a future issue of The Dallas Morning News.

Anatomy of an explosion

A close-up of the aftermath of an explosion, caused by a leaking natural gas line, is shown in this photo. The explosion occurred in a residential neighborhood in Dallas, killing one person and injuring several others. The explosion was caused by a natural gas line that had been damaged by construction work. The details of the explosion will be discussed in more detail in a future issue of The Dallas Morning News.

Scanning out data on blast/tear

A close-up of a natural gas line that was damaged by construction work is shown in this photo. The damage was caused by a piece of heavy equipment that was moved too close to the line. The details of the construction work will be discussed in more detail in a future issue of The Dallas Morning News.

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Third party damage

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Hey were normal Texas families, doing normal things at home: napping on the couch; rinsing off in the shower; flipping on the light.

Then their houses exploded.

More than two dozen homes across North and Central Texas have blown up since 2006 because of leaking natural gas, an investigation by The Dallas Morning News found. Nine people died; at least 22 others were badly injured.

These explosions all happened along a massive network of pipelines owned and operated by Atmos Energy Corp. It’s one of the country’s largest natural gas companies, headquartered in a gleaming tower on LBJ Freeway near the Galleria mall. Atmos pipes run under streets and behind homes across Dallas and Fort Worth, north to Sherman and south to College Station.

No single state or federal agency tracks all natural gas accidents, making it hard to get a handle on the destruction. Not all deaths and injuries are reported, and regulatory records are sometimes contradictory or incomplete.

We compiled our tally by searching thousands of regulatory records, lawsuits and news reports.

We examined government documents related to pipe corrosion and other safety problems on Atmos Energy’s system.
Though the company would not address individual accidents, it says it was not at fault.

The count of deaths, injuries and damaged homes doesn’t include cases in which cars hit gas meters or workers got hurt on the job. But it does include cases in which Atmos did not evacuate homes after leaks caused by excavation.

Atmos Energy has some of the nation’s oldest pipes, records show, leaving them vulnerable to corrosion, cracks and other dangers.

The company’s largest division — Atmos Mid-Tex, which includes Dallas and Fort Worth — has received five times as many state safety-violation citations as Houston’s CenterPoint, the other large gas-distribution company in Texas.

Atmos Energy leaders say they take safety seriously and have invested $3 billion in pipeline upgrades since 2005 on their Mid-Tex system alone. The safety violations are only alleged, the company says, adding that it fixes any problems cited by the state, as required by law.
The company has reported $3.3 billion in profits since 2005, with $798 million of that from the Mid-Tex system. Over the past five years, the price of Atmos Energy's stock has more than doubled, a sharp jump compared with many of its industry peers.

“Since 2005, we have been pouring profits back into the system,” says Elizabeth Beauchamp, an Atmos spokeswoman.

The company sent *The News* a **lengthy statement** saying, “Our employees wake up every day resolutely dedicated to our mission to keep people safe.”

Even one incident is too many, the statement says, adding, “When someone in our community gets hurt, it is deeply personal to us. We grieve.”

Atmos Energy’s track record should worry Texans, a pipeline safety expert told *The News*.

The many accidents and state safety citations over the years “suggest Atmos really needs to up its game in terms of creating a safety culture,” said Rebecca Craven, program director for the Pipeline Safety Trust, a national nonprofit group.

And based on a **key federal measure** — the rate of significant pipeline incidents over the past decade — Atmos Energy’s performance is actually getting worse, Craven says.

The company seldom accepts responsibility for explosions, records show, blaming lightning strikes and other bad weather, poor soil conditions in North Texas, mysterious sources of underground gas or careless digging by construction crews.

But the company has settled numerous lawsuits filed by families affected by explosions, sometimes paying millions of dollars, records show. Many of those families declined to speak to *The News* for this article, citing terms of confidential lawsuit settlements.

The company declined to respond to our questions about these settlements.
Old, old pipes

After a family dinner at a relative’s house, Domingo and Juliana Mendez watched the Cowboys play the San Francisco 49ers on TV one Sunday evening in September 2011. They waited for the rain to pass before returning near midnight to their Oak Cliff home with their 5-year-old son, Pablo.

The chain on the ceiling fixture was broken, so Domingo twisted the bulb to turn the light on. He remembers a loud blast and the rush of flames covering his body, burning all over.

He woke up under a wall that had collapsed on top of him and Pablo.

“I just remember hearing my son crying,” Domingo recalled recently. Pablo was badly burned, and a nail was stuck in his back.

The Mendezes spent months in Parkland Memorial Hospital. Pablo’s burns covered most of his face, hands and body.

The couple say they had no idea the pipes carrying natural gas through the neighborhood were almost 90-year-old cast iron.

Atmos technicians found a large crack circling the 6-inch gas main right behind the Mendez home. Iron had leached from the pipe over time, a state report said, leaving it weak and brittle.

But Dallas firefighters who responded to the blast said lightning was the cause, chalking that finding up to unnamed witnesses in a bare-bones report. Weather data shows no reports of lightning strikes in the neighborhood at that time of the day.
Atmos Energy didn’t notify state regulators at the Railroad Commission of Texas about the blast until the next morning, leaving the company’s workers in charge of the scene until investigators arrived nearly 12 hours later.

The company initially blamed lightning in state records, but later faulted a stove inside the house that they said had leaked. Dallas fire department reports make no mention of a leaking stove.

Gas companies are required to tell the federal government about certain accidents — including those in which people die or are injured seriously enough to be admitted to the hospital.

Federal data contains no report of the Mendez accident. The company says it initially filed a report with federal regulators but withdrew it more than a year later — after it determined a gas leak from the stove, not its own pipes, caused the blast.

This happened in March 2013, exactly one month after Atmos Energy settled a lawsuit filed by the Mendez family that alleged negligence.
Atmos officials “don’t want to take responsibility for it,” Domingo Mendez says. “They try to put the blame on anything else.”

Under the terms of the legal settlement, the family can’t say how much Atmos paid them. Court records show the company put at least $1.9 million into a trust for Pablo’s medical care.

Atmos also speeded up the rate at which it replaced cast iron pipe.

Natural gas companies have known about the dangers of such pipes since at least the 1970s, and federal officials have urged their removal since the 1980s. In 20 states and the District of Columbia, natural gas companies have done just that.

But Texas hasn’t required operators to remove cast iron, and when the Mendez home exploded, Atmos Energy reported that it still had 840 miles of these pipes, all on its Mid-Tex system. Last year, it told regulators 500 miles remained. The company says it needs at least three more years to rid its system of cast iron.

CenterPoint removed virtually all of its cast iron gas pipes in Houston more than two decades ago.

Atmos Energy reports that it has removed its cast iron in all other states where it operates.

More than a third of Atmos Energy’s pipes were installed before 1940, the company reported to federal regulators last year. Among the country’s big operators, only one, in Philadelphia, had such a significant share of old pipes.
Over time, older pipes often corrode underground, unnoticed, especially metal ones installed before more durable and flexible materials became the standard.

Clay soils in North Texas add extra strain on the system. Long periods of drought cause the clay to shrink and shift, pulling on underground gas pipes and creating leaks. When rain or ice arrives, the moisture causes the soil to expand rapidly, causing more strain and trapping dangerous pockets of leaking gas under the heavier water.

Federal investigations into Dallas-area gas explosions have documented the phenomenon since the 1970s, when Lone Star Gas owned and operated the pipeline system. Atmos bought Lone Star from TXU Gas in 2004.

Experts say the oldest, riskiest pipes are made of cast iron or bare steel — and Atmos Energy’s North Texas division has the highest share of those in Texas.

Federal rules require gas distributors to use pipes and components that can “maintain the structural integrity of the pipeline under temperature and other environmental conditions that may be anticipated.”

Atmos Energy officials say that older pipes aren’t necessarily more problematic, and that only one of the accidents highlighted by The News — the 2011 Oak Cliff blast — involved pre-1940 pipes.
“Although we’d like to replace all older pipelines immediately, just like with replacing older roads and bridges, replacing pipe takes time and resources,” the company said in a statement.

Critics say Atmos should be replacing old pipes faster.

“Atmos knows there are going to be more explosions,” says Clay Miller, a lawyer who represented the Mendezes in their lawsuit against the company.

“You leave old pipes there, soil’s gonna shift, pipes are going to crack, and things are going to blow up.”

The most safety citations

A lack of uniform data among states makes it hard to compare Atmos Energy’s safety record to those of other gas utilities across the country.

But in Texas, the Atmos Mid-Tex division — the huge one that includes Dallas and Fort Worth — has been hit with more safety-violation citations from state inspectors than other large operators. Over the past decade, Atmos Mid-Tex has received more than 2,000 citations alleging violations of pipeline safety rules, state data shows.

By contrast, the only natural gas distributor that rivals Atmos Mid-Tex in size — CenterPoint Energy — had slightly more than 400 citations over the same time period.

One of the most common problems the state cited Atmos Energy for? Not protecting its gas lines from corrosion. Regulators also dinged the company more than 20 times for not replacing a kind of pipe connector with a history of problems.

Atmos Energy officials noted that the number of citations peaked in 2013 and has markedly declined since then, which the company says reflects its emphasis on safety.
For example, thousands of Atmos employees each year train at a high-tech facility the company opened in Plano in 2010. The training center includes a simulated community called “Gas City” with houses, streets, pipelines and meters. One recent day, several employees used a special tool to check gas levels under a manhole cover in the mock village, while others practiced connecting gas meters.

Still, Atmos Mid-Tex continues to surpass the state’s other largest gas operators in annual citations. The state allows companies to correct cited problems to avoid final violations and fines. And even when companies pay a fine, they do not have to admit fault.
Once a gas company finds a dangerous leak, it’s legally required to fix the pipe immediately and to keep any people nearby from harm.

Atmos Energy executives have maintained in interviews and statements to The News that the company always repairs hazardous leaks “as soon as possible.”

But records show that Atmos Energy hasn’t always done so.

Magdalena Tijerina and her family were in their Irving home last Dec. 31 when Atmos Energy workers knocked on the door. They told the family they were working outside to fix a gas leak.

Tijerina asked if her family should leave, according to Irving Fire Department reports.

The gas crew said that wasn’t necessary — the leak was in the street. Tijerina fell asleep on the couch.

She awoke to find her ceiling in flames. A piece fell on her. She pushed it off, grabbed the keys to her truck and screamed at her family to get out, according to her statement.

Everyone in the home made it out alive. The family could not be reached for comment.

The man who first called in the gas leak, Jon Higginbotham, wonders why Atmos Energy didn’t urge Tijerina’s family to evacuate.

Higginbotham was leaving his mom’s house nearby that night when the stench of gas overwhelmed his pregnant wife.
“These pipes get old and they leak, I get that,” Higginbotham says. “We all understand nothing lasts forever — but you can at least evacuate those people and make sure they’re safe.”

The state faulted Atmos for not monitoring the leak throughout the night to see if homes should have been evacuated.

What caused the leak? A connector on the gas main hadn’t been installed properly to withstand wear and tear, the state found. It cited Atmos Energy for that, too.

Regulators fined Atmos $16,000, which the company paid. In an Aug. 23 letter to the state, Atmos said it does not admit to any alleged safety violations and that the accident’s cause remains unclear.

Third-party damage

Pipes can also spring leaks when work crews damage them, digging to repair sewer lines, say, or installing fence posts. Atmos Energy says damage by others is the most common cause of gas leaks on its system.

But in several cases in which Atmos didn’t cause the leak, the company still failed to shut off gas or evacuate homes before someone was hurt or killed, records show.
In 2008, a contractor working for Atmos struck one of its gas lines in McKinney. The workers called the company, and an Atmos crew arrived an hour later. Neither the contractor nor Atmos called 911 immediately, records show, and they did not evacuate homes near the leak.

Within hours, three houses blew up, injuring several people — including a 77-year-old woman and a 57-year-old man who later died from their injuries. State regulators fined Atmos $26,000 the following year for not evacuating the nearby residents, noting that one of the Atmos technicians moved his truck several times before the blast but didn’t warn residents or evacuate homes.

In 2013, in the northwest Dallas suburb of Lewisville, a construction crew hit one of Atmos Energy’s 4-inch gas mains.

The company didn’t immediately shut off the gas or fully assist emergency responders, according to state records. Two hours later, a nearby house exploded after filling with natural gas, and a 55-year-old man was killed.

The state found that Atmos Energy had broken five safety rules and fined the company $25,000.

**Customers pay**

Who pays the cost of Atmos Energy’s lawsuits and settlements over injuries and wrongful deaths? Ultimately, its customers.
When the company filed to raise rates in Dallas last year, records show, it sought to recover $600,000 a year to pay off what it owed its insurer for several explosions.

Atmos Energy officials insist their natural gas network is in good shape.

At a hearing in April, president and CEO Mike Haefner made a promise to Dallas city officials: “I can assure you our system is safe today, and with recent investments, it’s safer than it’s ever been.”

He was there to answer questions about the northwest Dallas house explosion in February that had killed 12-year-old Linda Rogers as she was getting ready for school.

Records show Atmos had found a leak near her home nearly two months before her death.

The National Transportation Safety Board is still investigating, but its preliminary report cited a crack on a 2-inch steel gas pipeline in the alley behind her house.

For Domingo Mendez, the news of Linda’s death was haunting, he says.

“The three of us made it out alive,” he says now, shaking his head. Sometimes, he still flinches while twisting in lightbulbs.

Mendez returned to his old job as a diesel mechanic with the city of Arlington, repairing dump trucks on the night shift.

Pablo is 12 now. He’s happy and healthy and loves watching YouTube videos on his phone, playing the video game Fortnite and drawing cartoons.
Juliana Mendez gave birth in the spring to a baby boy, Mateo, after years of trying to get pregnant.

The family now lives in a two-story home with a yard. It’s big enough for a swimming pool for Pablo’s physical therapy, a flock of chickens and three dogs — including Goofy the chihuahua, who survived the 2011 blast.

The house is all electric, on purpose. It has no gas service.

On April 4, Domingo Mendez noticed a smell in his backyard after heavy rains. He spotted bubbles rising through the puddles of water. He called Atmos Energy.

Crews found a hazardous gas leak, state records show. It was from a 6-inch main, like the one that had leaked behind the Mendezes’ old house. But this pipe was made of bare steel — another material the federal government has repeatedly warned about.

Workers repaired the leak quickly, but Mendez says he worries: What if gas leaks again from that steel line? What if it sneaks inside his house, unnoticed, and someone flips a light switch?

Atmos needs to put public safety first and replace its aging, leaky lines, he says.

“It seems like they’re just waiting for another explosion to fix any of this.”
How Texas lets Atmos Energy off the hook

By Holly K. Hacker and Cary Aspinwall

Published Sept. 23, 2018

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The Dallas Morning News

Supreme Court nominee

2nd woman alleges sexual misconduct

Kavanaugh enjoyed himself during party in 1983-84 when she was 15.

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Regulators put Atmos’ interests first

Hazardous natural gas leaks across Atmos Energy’s Mid-Res system

Atmos Energy is a management and fund company, but 10% of the company’s stock is held by shareholders. The company’s stock price dropped after it was revealed that the Mid-Res system had hazardous gas leaks.

The company responded by saying that it was working to fix the problem, but shareholders demanded more information on the company’s finances and operations.

State rarely imposes stiff fines on Atmos

Railroad Commission independent reports

The Railroad Commission of Texas released independent reports on Atmos Energy’s operations. The reports showed that the company had violated safety regulations and that it should be fined.

However, the commission did not impose any significant fines. The company was given a warning and told to improve its safety procedures.

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A house had blown up, killing a young girl. Federal investigators combed through the wreckage in northwest Dallas for clues about whether natural gas had caused the fatal February blast and still endangered the neighborhood.

State regulators involved with the case shared different concerns, according to text messages obtained by The Dallas Morning News.

They worried about the feds asking tough questions of Atmos Energy, the company that operates the natural gas system in North Texas.

One federal inspector “is apparently always skeptical,” the state’s pipeline safety director texted a colleague.

“To him, operators are always guilty until they are proven innocent.”

Putting Atmos Energy’s interests first is a habit for regulators at the Railroad Commission of Texas. The oddly named agency is supposed to serve as a watchdog for the public and ensure that Atmos Energy and other gas companies operate safely.

But The News found that when Atmos is involved in serious accidents — or even minor safety infractions — the state often lets the company off the hook.
The state didn’t fine Atmos Energy after a man died in a house explosion in Irving.

After a young boy was severely burned in his home in Oak Cliff.

After a little girl’s back caught fire in a blast near Fort Worth.

The state has cited the company’s Mid-Tex division — its largest, and the one that includes Dallas-Fort Worth — for more than 2,000 alleged safety violations in the past decade, documents show. Over that same period, Atmos Mid-Tex has paid less than $250,000 in penalties, according to state records.

The whole company reported profits of $2.8 billion over that time.

The penalties ranged from $2,500 to $95,000. The state’s other large natural gas operators got similar treatment.

Critics say such anemic oversight results in a lack of urgency for Atmos Energy and other gas companies to make changes that can keep people safer.

“You don’t have to worry about enforcement or being penalized by the state of Texas, so there’s very little incentive to comply with the regulations,” says Brigham McCown, formerly a deputy and acting administrator of the Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration, the federal agency that oversees the nation’s pipelines.

A company that keeps getting cited for the same kinds of violations has a safety problem, McCown says. “The fines should be exponentially ratcheted up until you take care of the situation.”

The Railroad Commission sees it differently. Fines are just one enforcement tool, the agency said in a written statement to The News. It also orders gas operators to correct any alleged violations.
“The Railroad Commission has fined, and will continue to fine any operator, when determined appropriate for violations,” the agency said.

As for that text-message exchange after the fatal Dallas explosion? In its statement, the commission said the texts reflect “the importance of approaching an incident with no preconceived notions before an investigation has begun or evidence has been collected.”

**Minor issues**

Not long after that February explosion killed 12-year-old Linda Rogers in northwest Dallas, Atmos Energy discovered so many leaks that it had to evacuate her neighborhood and replace the entire gas-distribution network there.

Looking for answers for outraged constituents, the Dallas City Council wanted to know more about Atmos Energy’s safety record. So the company shared its three most recent annual state inspections, along with a letter full of pride.

The Railroad Commission found only 23 safety citations in Dallas over three years, Atmos Mid-Tex president John Paris bragged to Mayor Mike Rawlings. Paris called them minor issues because they didn’t result in any fines.

Among the alleged offenses:

Atmos didn’t fix dangerous gas leaks promptly or properly. It hadn’t replaced potentially dangerous parts, as required by the state. It didn’t fully protect steel pipes against corrosion.

Routinely, the state lets Atmos and other operators correct their alleged violations and pay no fines. Even if they pay fines, the companies do not have to admit fault.
Two accidents, two injuries, zero fines

Four days before Thanksgiving in 2009, a married couple in Lancaster, south of Dallas, woke to the smell of smoke filling their home.

Larry Williams opened a door and gas exploded, sending flames through the heating vents and knocking his wife, Yvonne, to the floor. She suffered first- and second-degree burns on her face, hands and back, according to a lawsuit the couple filed in 2011.
Investigators found the cause of the blast: a leak in the main gas line that ran in front of the house, according to a state report. A seal joining two plastic pipes had started to crack, letting natural gas seep out.

The Railroad Commission cited Atmos for not filing accident reports on time and for not sending the broken pipe segment to a lab for testing. But the state didn’t consider those alleged violations serious enough to warrant fines.

The Williamses withdrew their lawsuit in June 2013. Yvonne Williams recently declined to talk to The News, citing a confidential agreement with Atmos Energy.

In December 2013, a similar pipe defect caused an explosion at a home in North Richland Hills, near Fort Worth. This time, a 7-year-old girl was seriously burned.

Four days before Christmas, Maya Javier was playing video games with her cousins at her aunt and uncle’s house. She got up, walked toward the bathroom and flipped the light switch.

Boom.

Her aunt saw Maya’s back on fire, according to court records. Her uncle, Marvin Reinoshek, pulled Maya from under the bathroom door and took her outside, he told TV crews at the time.

Maya suffered burns over 40 percent of her body.

The explosion lifted the roof, shattered windows and tore out walls inside the Reinoshek home, court records show.

A year later, in December 2014, the state sent Atmos a letter proposing a fine of up to $50,000. The state’s investigation noted that the same problem that caused the Reinoshek home to explode — poorly fused plastic pipes — had also caused the earlier blast at the Williams home in Lancaster. Atmos should have addressed the problem after that first explosion in 2009 but hadn’t, the state said.
Actually, Atmos replied, it had looked at that problem. It caused such a tiny share of reported leaks — 13 out of every 10,000 — that it didn’t warrant a special plan, the company told the state.

After exchanging a few more letters and emails, the state withdrew its case against Atmos Energy. The state said it required the company to take corrective actions.

But Atmos paid no fines.

The company did, however, end up paying Maya and the Reinosheks to settle a lawsuit they had filed in Dallas County. Maya’s mother did not respond to requests for comment.

In 2007, WFAA-TV (Channel 8) began a series of damning investigations about another problem: pipe connectors, called compression couplings, that were known to pop apart and cause gas explosions. The Railroad Commission rewrote pipeline safety rules so that “all joints on steel and plastic pipe below ground must be welded or designed and installed to resist pullout” and required the removal of certain types of couplings.

But Atmos Energy has amassed more than 20 alleged violations since 2009 for not replacing couplings.

The Railroad Commission identified yet another problem — leaky steel service lines running from gas mains to customers’ homes — after investigating explosions in Mesquite in 2009 and Irving in 2010. The regulator initially threatened to make Atmos replace all steel service lines, but records show Atmos was allowed to replace a certain number of lines across its system.
Handwritten notes from Railroad Commission staff members in state records show Atmos complained about the cost of replacing lines and blamed delays on problems finding qualified workers.

Changing findings

In some investigations that The News examined, the Railroad Commission appeared to change its official findings to match Atmos Energy’s explanations.

In 2007, a gas leak in the street caused an explosion at an all-electric home in Cleburne, an hour southwest of Dallas, killing two women and injuring several family members.

The family sued. Right before testimony began in the lawsuit, Atmos settled the case for an undisclosed sum.

In 2009, the state’s investigation departed sharply from its report a year earlier, which clearly stated that the blast had been caused by natural gas leaks on Atmos’ lines.

An update to the state’s report said Atmos probably wasn’t to blame: “This event appears to be the result of a combination of factors that was not readily foreseeable.” The report cites Atmos’ own investigation, which found “insufficient evidence” to support that natural gas leaks could have caused such an explosion.
When *The News* requested a copy of state regulators’ full investigation file from that 2007 explosion, the Railroad Commission sent only four pages of the original report, saying *it didn’t keep all older investigation records*, even in cases in which people died. We obtained a copy through Johnson County court records.

*The News* found several cases in which Atmos said something other than leaking gas near someone’s house had caused explosions that injured or killed people, and the commission took the company’s word.

The Railroad Commission told *The News* its investigations are independent.

“It is not uncommon in an incident for the initial suspected cause to change or evolve as facts, evidence and information is collected and assessed through the investigative process,” the commission said in its statement.

Texas has authority to hit Atmos and other companies with stiff fines when they break the rules. But the state rarely does.

Since 2008, the state has cited Atmos more than 90 times for not repairing dangerous leaks promptly in Dallas-Fort Worth and other parts of the state. But only three times did those citations result in penalties, state records show.

Instead of hitting gas companies in the wallet for safety lapses, the state allows copious time for them to fix their mistakes.

Even when Atmos Energy does pay a fine, sometimes the regulator still helps the company, records show.

In 2013, when a gas explosion in Lewisville left one man dead and two other people injured, the state fined Atmos $25,000.
But in drafting the settlement, Atmos’ lawyer asked the state to add language that made clear Atmos admitted no wrongdoing. It had a lawsuit pending at the time.

Texas complied. The commission says such language is standard for enforcement orders.

### Railroad Commission: Independent reports?

In some investigations *The Dallas Morning News* examined, the Railroad Commission of Texas appeared to change its official findings to match Atmos Energy’s explanations. The commission maintains that its investigations are independent, and that findings may change as it gathers new information. Atmos says it is entitled to due process during the state’s investigations.

#### Cleburne, 2007: Deadly house explosion

In the state’s investigation report filed in 2008, the cause of the explosion that blew up a house, killing two women, was listed as natural gas along the Atmos Energy main.

> The probable cause of the incident was natural gas leaks along the Atmos Energy natural gas main that had migrated natural gas to the residence at 632 Woodard Ave, Cleburne, Texas.

In February 2009, state regulators changed their findings in an updated incident report. The new cause was “a combination of factors that was not readily foreseeable.” The update stated that although three gas leaks were found and repaired near the home, there was “insufficient evidence to support” that the gas escaping from those leaks could have caused the explosion.

#### Incident ID: 93

UPDATE - 2/20/09 - THE CAUSE OF THIS EVENT APPEARS TO BE THE RESULT OF A COMBINATION OF FACTORS THAT WAS NOT READILY FORESEEABLE. DURING ATOMS ENERGY CORPORATION'S INVESTIGATION SUBSEQUENT TO THE INCIDENT, THREE LEAKS WERE FOUND AND REPAIRED ON WOODARD AVENUE. HOWEVER, THERE IS INSUFFICIENT EVIDENCE TO SUPPORT THAT GAS ESCAPING FROM THESE LOCATIONS (632 WOODARD, 634 WOODARD, 700 WOODARD) WAS SIGNIFICANT ENOUGH TO RELEASE GAS RAPIDLY ENOUGH TO HAVE CAUSED THE INCIDENT. ADDITIONALLY, THE LEAK LOCATED POST-ACCIDENT AT 632 WOODARD WAS DETERMINED TO HAVE BEEN CAUSED BY A MANUFACTURING OR MACHINING DEFECT IN THE COLLECTOR COUPLING THAT WAS VISIBLE TO THE ORIGINAL INSTALLER. ATOMS ENERGY CORPORATION'S INVESTIGATION HAS ALSO RESULTED IN THE DETERMINATION THAT THE OCCUPANTS OF 632 WOODARD WERE AWARE OF A POTENTIAL HAZARD WHEN THEY CONTACTED LOCAL FIRE AUTHORITIES, BUT DISREGARDED INSTRUCTIONS BY SUCH AUTHORITIES IN LIGHTING ADDITIONAL CIGARETTES.

**SOURCE:** Railroad Commission documents

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Click here to see more cases where the commission's findings appeared to change.
In several other states, companies that break pipeline safety rules don’t get off so easy.

Since a devastating transmission pipeline explosion in 2011 near San Francisco, regulators in California have penalized operators far more aggressively for breaking safety rules.

For instance, in 2016, the state fined one gas company $2.25 million for not following through on plans to prevent pipeline corrosion.

And Washington state levied its largest fine ever — $2.75 million — last year against a gas company for numerous violations that led to a Seattle explosion that injured nine firefighters.

Part of what keeps the relationship so friendly between gas companies and the Railroad Commission, critics contend: The companies’ employees make generous campaign donations to the elected officials who oversee the commission.

Since 2006, Atmos Energy’s political action committee and donors who said they worked for Atmos have given more than $200,000 to past and present members of the Railroad Commission. That works out to about 1 percent of all campaign donations those officials received, according to The News’ analysis of state campaign finance records.

In addition, the company’s employees and political action committee have donated about $2 million to other elected state officials and candidates over that same period, campaign finance records show.

A 2016 study by three watchdog groups found that railroad commissioners received more than 60 percent of their campaign war chests from the oil and gas industry, the very interests they’re supposed to regulate.

All three sitting commissioners told The News that they base their decisions on evidence, expertise and the state’s best interest.
Commissioner Ryan Sitton addressed Atmos Energy specifically. “My focus continues to be on ensuring that Atmos is following our rules, industry best practices and that they are doing what is necessary to keep their system safe,” he said. “Campaign contributions have zero impact on that.”

The typical voter has no clue what the Railroad Commission does, state reports have found. It hasn’t overseen railroads since 2005, but the public still calls to complain about trains.

Over the years, watchdogs and some lawmakers have called for reform: Give the commission a new name, one that reflects what it actually does. Let commissioners accept campaign donations only during election season, not over their full six-year terms. Or do away with elected commissioners altogether and replace them with a part-time, appointed board.

Those efforts have gone nowhere.

Another longtime criticism is the revolving door at the Railroad Commission. A former commission executive went to work for an oil and gas industry group. A commissioner left his post after seven years to head an energy exploration company. A former Shell Oil executive became the agency’s director in 2016, then left last year.

The Railroad Commission said it follows all state and federal employment laws, as well as its own policy, which added a few more restrictions, such as banning former commissioners or executive directors from lobbying the agency.

The current head of the commission’s oversight and safety division, Kari French, was previously an executive at Austin’s main natural gas company, Texas Gas Service, and its parent company.

She was president in 2012, when a 43-year-old father died in a natural gas explosion in Austin; the state cited the company for three safety rule violations.
The Railroad Commission handed down an unusual $150,000 fine. Two months later, it hired French, who soon became director of the oversight and safety division — which includes pipeline safety. She remains in that role.

The commission said it routinely finds the best, most capable candidates through a competitive process.

In several cases The News reviewed, the Railroad Commission initially pursued fines against Atmos Energy when people got hurt or died — but enforcement cases dragged on for years, and the state eventually abandoned the efforts.

Three years after a 75-year-old man died when his Irving home blew up: Case dismissed.

Two years after a family was permanently disfigured when their Oak Cliff home exploded: Case dismissed.

And two years after a little girl was burned in a blast while playing video games at her uncle’s home, a handwritten note appeared in the state’s file: “Meeting with Kari French: She says dismiss this case.”

French referred questions to a spokeswoman for the commission, who said it withdrew a proposed fine after Atmos came into regulatory compliance.

The commission’s own records state that the case was dismissed.
Supplemental materials
No agency tracks all residential natural gas accidents. Here’s how we did it.

By Holly K. Hacker and Cary Aspinwall
Published Sept. 23, 2018

After 12-year-old Linda Rogers died in a natural gas blast in northwest Dallas in February, we wondered: How often do such explosions happen in our part of Texas? How often are people hurt or killed, and how often are their homes destroyed or damaged?

It turned out that no government agency had the answer. So we had to find it ourselves.

It wasn’t easy. We filed dozens of public records requests. We drove 50 miles to a courthouse to get old files. We read through thousands of pages of documents. We scoured old newspaper and TV reports. We talked to a lot of people.

Here’s what we learned along the way:

A federal agency tracks some gas-related explosions. It’s called the Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration, or PHMSA.
Companies like Atmos Energy Corp. have to report natural gas incidents — but only in certain circumstances, including when someone dies or gets admitted to the hospital, or if there’s more than about $120,000 of damage.

When someone dies later, though, companies don’t always have to update their reports to the federal agency. In 2008, two people died and one was injured after a natural gas-related explosion in McKinney. We were surprised to find that the official federal record showed three injuries but no deaths.

Here’s why, according to the federal agency: Companies have to report deaths only if they happen within 30 days of the gas incident. The two people in McKinney died after that window closed.

We also found no federal report of a 2011 explosion in Dallas that seriously burned a mother and father and their 5-year-old son. They spent months in the hospital and still bear scars today.

Atmos Energy said it did file a report, then withdrew it more than a year later. Though firefighters said lighting caused the gas leak that led to the explosion, Atmos said it determined that a leaking stove — not its gas system — had caused the blast. Federal rules don’t require such accidents to be reported.

We also discovered that some basic information — like how many times the state cited Atmos Energy and other gas companies for alleged safety violations — wasn’t on a state website. So we requested the documentation through state open records laws. We also found that the state didn’t post every enforcement case it brought against Atmos and other gas operators. So we requested those, too.

Another important note: Our tally doesn’t include every single natural gas explosion. We wanted to focus on incidents that may have been within Atmos Energy’s control. For instance, when a young man sped down Buckner Boulevard in Dallas in 2014, hit a gas meter, and died in the resulting fire, we didn’t include that. When a construction company working on Cesar
Chavez Boulevard last year broke a gas line near Main Street and caused about $700,000 in damage, we didn’t include that, either. But we did include situations in which Atmos was cited for not evacuating homes or shutting off gas quickly.

Follow Holly K. Hacker and Cary Aspinwall on Twitter at @hollyhacker and @caryaspinwall.
The tally of destruction

By Cary Aspinwall, Holly K. Hacker and Allan James Vestal
Published Sept. 23, 2018

Since 2006, more than two dozen homes across north and central Texas have been destroyed or damaged because of natural gas leaking from Atmos Energy’s system, an investigation by The Dallas Morning News found. Nine people died, and at least 22 others suffered injuries.

No one government agency tracks all natural gas-related accidents, so we compiled this tally by searching regulatory records, lawsuits, news reports and other documents.

Oct. 16, 2006
310 S. Third St., Wylie, Texas

What happened: State records show a plastic gas line running to the meter separated from a part called a compression coupling in the alley behind the house. Gas migrated through soil and the sewer system and found a source of ignition in the house, blasting a couple out of their beds as they slept. Benny died instantly, Martha died later.

Victims: Benny Cryer, 78, and Martha Cryer, 77, were killed.

Railroad Commission decision: No fine. The draft version of the investigation suggested compression couplings should be replaced, but that was omitted from the final version. Investigators found two dozen leaks in the area after the blast.

Atmos response: Other work crews had dug in the area a year before and didn’t compact the soil properly. The company settled a lawsuit filed by the family.

Read the accident investigation report »
Jan. 15, 2007

2824 W. Rochelle Road, Irving, Texas

What happened: A fire and explosion at the one-story brick house caused about $20,000 in property damage. Investigators later found two gas leaks near the home — including one that Atmos had first detected four months earlier and classified as nonhazardous. The other leak occurred on the steel main line in front of the home.

Railroad Commission decision: The commission fined Atmos $13,000. Atmos should have monitored the first leak more closely and reclassified it as hazardous, the state said. With better monitoring, Atmos would also have found the corrosion leak on the main line.

Atmos' response: The company gave refresher training to its Irving technicians.

Read the enforcement case file »

May 29, 2007

632 Woodard Ave., Cleburne, Texas

What happened: An all-electric home exploded after gas migrated inside along sewer lines, leaking from aging gas pipes in the street. A man lit a cigarette for his wife, which ignited the gas inside the home.

Victims: Hazel Sanderson, 44, and Hazel Pawlik, 64, were killed. Three people were injured.

Railroad Commission decision: Initially, investigators found a plastic gas pipe had separated at the compression coupling, as well as a leak on the gas main in the street (though the home was not connected to gas lines). Two years after the blast, the Railroad Commission decided not to refer the case for enforcement, saying Atmos had done its own investigation showing there was “insufficient evidence” those leaks had caused the blast.

Atmos response: Atmos said other gas sources could have caused the leak. The company settled a lawsuit filed by the family.

Read the accident investigation report »
May 16, 2008

Intersection of Fenet St. and Throckmorton St., McKinney, Texas

What happened: A contractor working for Atmos hit a 3-inch gas main while replacing a line and called the company but not 911. Atmos technicians arrived an hour later and didn’t investigate whether gas had built up in the sewer lines or evacuate people in nearby homes.

Three houses exploded as a result, injuring three people, two of whom died later of their injuries. One death was reported to state authorities, but neither one appears in databases kept by federal regulators because they died more than a month after the accident.

Victims: Nancy Foster, 77, and Arthur Bryson, 57, were killed. One person was injured.

Railroad Commission decision: The commission said Atmos failed by not checking the sewer lines for gas or following proper safety procedures, such as calling 911 or evacuating homes immediately.

Atmos response: Atmos paid a $26,000 fine and settled several lawsuits related to the incident.

Read the enforcement case file »

May 3, 2009

2602 Syracuse Drive, Irving, Texas

What happened: A man was badly burned when he lit a cigarette in his home and it exploded. Firefighters and state investigators found a leak on a compression coupling connecting the home’s service line to the gas main. The man and several of his neighbors said they had not smelled leaking gas.

Victims: One person was injured.

Railroad Commission decision: Atmos initially argued that the incident didn’t meet requirements for reporting to federal regulators, but the commission disagreed. Atmos didn’t follow proper emergency procedures or identify a hazardous leak quickly enough, the agency said. When the company argued that concentrations of leaking gas it found weren’t enough to have caused the explosion, the commission pointed out that the company had spent several days after the blast vacuuming excess gas from the scene.
Atmos response: The company contended that the leak found at scene was too small to have caused the explosion. But Atmos paid to settle a lawsuit filed by injured man and his family.

Read the pipeline failure investigation »

Nov. 20, 2009

2505 Catalina Drive, Mesquite, Texas

What happened: Leaking gas caused an explosion that totaled a Mesquite home, injuring a woman inside. An Atmos technician who investigated initially said he was told by firefighters that the blast was caused by carbon monoxide, so he left without finding or eliminating the hazardous gas leak. Atmos didn’t repair the leak until 17 days after the blast, once the homeowners’ insurance company got involved.

Victims: One person was injured.

Railroad Commission decision: Atmos didn’t follow proper leak detection or emergency procedures. The commission initially proposed fining the company $190,000 but agreed to settle the enforcement case for $95,000. Because investigators found so many leaks on the Mesquite system, the commission forced Atmos to replace a large number of steel service lines in the city.

Atmos response: Atmos paid the fine and agreed to replace steel service lines, then later complained to the commission about the cost and a lack of available workers.

Read the enforcement case file »

Nov. 22, 2009

503 Martindale Drive, Lancaster, Texas

What happened: Gas leaked from a seam where two plastic pipes were fused together and into the home of a sleeping couple. When the man opened his garage door to investigate the source of smoke filling the house, a fireball ignited, burning his wife.

Victims: One person was injured.

Railroad Commission decision: The commission cited Atmos for not preserving a section of the pipe for testing, and not submitting required reports but did not fine the company.
Atmos response: Settled a lawsuit filed by the family.

Read the investigation report »

Jan. 21, 2010
2813 Kessler Ave., Wichita Falls, Texas

What happened: A house burned and was destroyed after an explosion that started when a woman flipped a light switch, igniting gas that had leaked into her home. Investigators found a leak on a bare steel service line under the foundation; gas had migrated through a seam in the concrete.

Victims: One person was injured.

Railroad Commission decision: Initially, the state had proposed fining Atmos $10,000 for not providing all information, and found that an earlier leak complaint near the home might have been ignored. But the case was ultimately not referred for enforcement.

Atmos response: Atmos said it had provided the required leak-investigation report to the commission.

Read the enforcement case file »

Jan. 31, 2010
3521 Finley Road, Irving, Texas

What happened: Joseph Mantheiy and his wife, Peggy, were sleeping when their home exploded in the middle of the night. He was killed and she was badly burned. She later told WFAA-TV (Channel 8) she had not smelled the gas leaking from a compression coupling that connected a steel service line to the main.

Victims: Joseph Mantheiy, 75, was killed. One person was injured.

Railroad Commission decision: Atmos didn’t perform “continuing surveillance activities to remove or replace all steel service lines in the Irving system as required” and did not have a program in place to replace or phase out those lines. Regulators cited “Atmos Energy’s exhaustive investigation,” which said the leak identified was “not large enough” to have caused the blast. The case was dismissed without a fine three years later.
Atmos response: Though a leaking coupling was discovered, in addition to 20 other leaks in the area, Atmos said that leak couldn’t have caused the fire/explosion. It asked the commission to dismiss the enforcement case after three years, “in light of the time that has passed since this matter was opened.” The company paid to settle a lawsuit filed by the family.

Read the enforcement case file »

Sept. 18, 2011

331 W. Woodin Blvd., Dallas, Texas

What happened: Domingo, Juliana and Pablo Mendez returned home late after a dinner with relatives; when Domingo twisted a light bulb into the kitchen fixture, the house exploded. All three were badly burned. Atmos technicians found a hazardous leak on a cast-iron gas main right behind the Mendez home that night but didn’t notify state regulators about the blast until the following morning. Firefighters said witnesses reported that lightning might have caused the blast, but weather data doesn’t show any recorded lightning strikes at that time in that area.

Victims: Three people were injured.

Railroad Commission decision: The commission initially proposed fining Atmos for not having a cast-iron replacement program in place and not calling state investigators within two hours of the blast, as required. Two years later, it dismissed the enforcement case after Atmos provided information to the commission that the gas source was “more likely from customer piping downstream of the Atmos service meter.”

Atmos response: Though Atmos told The News that firefighters said the blast was caused by lightning, the company filed documents in a lawsuit, brought by the Mendez family, that argued that a leaking stove was to blame. Atmos paid to settle the lawsuit.

Read the enforcement case file »

Oct. 22, 2011

205 Abbey Lane, Farmersville, Texas

What happened: An explosion and fire at an unoccupied house in Farmersville, possibly ignited by a water heater and not discovered for a few days. No injuries reported.
Railroad Commission decision: The commission’s investigation found that Atmos was upgrading low-pressure systems in the area to higher-pressure lines and was supposed to install pressure regulators on each natural gas customer’s meter equipment. The investigators found that no one had installed one at 205 Abbey Lane. The service line to the home was also missing from a map used by Atmos in the area.

Atmos response: Atmos did not comment specifically on this incident but said that overall, “For matters within our control, we take appropriate voluntary corrective action.”

Read the incident report »

Dec. 6, 2011
4908 Orien St., Haltom City, Texas

What happened: A family was cleaning up from dinner as their home exploded in Haltom City, sending one person to the hospital. The force of the blast sent a wall on top of the gas meter, shearing it off at ground level and making it difficult to shut off gas, records show. The family said they had smelled gas on the day of the explosion, according to a fire investigator’s report. They also said they saw the gas meter on fire immediately after the blast. A compression coupling was found but was damaged by Atmos during excavation.

Victims: One person was injured.

Railroad Commission decision: The commission cited Atmos for not properly protecting the meter and the service line from corrosion and for not repairing a hazardous leak promptly. The state issued no fines.

Atmos response: In a letter to federal regulators, Atmos said the incident did not involve gas under its purview.

Read the pipeline failure investigation »

Jan. 18, 2012
501 Ferguson St., Taylor, Texas

What happened: A man flicked his lighter inside the house he lived in, and it exploded into a fireball. He was burned badly, along with a friend who was present. Atmos responded but didn’t conduct a leak survey until the following day and did not report the incident to the Railroad Commission until a year later. Lawsuit depositions show a firefighter testified that
an Atmos technician told him at the scene that the high gas concentrations he found were “false readings.”

**Victims:** Two people were injured.

**Railroad Commission decision:** The state fined Atmos $5,000 for not following proper procedures for an emergency response. It discovered the explosion only after a complaint was filed and never had a chance to investigate the explosion at the time.

**Atmos response:** Atmos told the state that it found a gas leak the day after the blast but that the structure that burned was 15 feet away and technicians didn’t see a migration pattern. The company claimed in a lawsuit that the cause might have been sewer gas, but settled the case before it went to trial.

*Read the enforcement case file »*

**Jan. 11, 2013**

**520 E. Main St., Lewisville, Texas**

**What happened:** An electric company trying to install a utility pole struck a 4-inch gas distribution line owned by Atmos. Because there wasn’t an emergency shut-off valve in the area and Atmos did not turn the gas off at the nearest station, officials said, gas leaked for more than seven hours, causing an explosion that killed a man living at a duplex. Two others were injured in the blast.

**Victims:** Scott Deahl, 55, was killed. Two people were injured.

**Railroad Commission decision:** Saying that Atmos “failed to protect people first and then property” by not shutting off the gas or evacuating homes, the commission found five violations and fined the company $25,000.

**Atmos response:** Atmos said it was following directions of the local firefighters, did not find gas in the sewer and was in the process of digging up a pipe to shut off the gas when the explosion happened. It paid the penalty and settled a lawsuit, records show.

*Read the enforcement case file »*
Jan. 24, 2013

221 W. Tennie St., Gainesville, Texas

What happened: A city dump truck fell into a sinkhole during a water line repair, and the crew noticed natural gas bubbling up through water while trying to dig the truck out with a backhoe. An Atmos technician arrived to disconnect homes from meters and turn gas off, but the truck’s axle had hit a service line, causing it to leak gas into sewer lines. Atmos evacuated nearby homes, but within two hours, a house exploded and burned. Atmos then evacuated everyone within a larger radius. There were no injuries.

Railroad Commission decision: Atmos failed to make an emergency shutdown and minimize hazards. The state fined the company $5,000.

Atmos response: Paid fine and asked commission to include specific language in consent order to “ensure no prejudice to company’s litigation rights.”

Read the enforcement case file »

Dec. 21, 2013

7916 Harwood Road, North Richland Hills, Texas

What happened: A 7-year-old girl was playing video games when she got up to use the bathroom and flipped on a light switch. The house exploded, blowing out windows and lifting the roof off the home. She was hospitalized with severe burns; several other family members had minor injuries. Investigators found a fused joint on a plastic pipe in the neighborhood had caused gas to leak into sewer lines. The light switch ignited the leaking gas.

Victims: One person was injured.

Railroad Commission decision: The state initially proposed a $50,000 fine, saying it found no evidence Atmos had any program to mitigate the threat of such leaking joints, especially in light of an earlier, 2009 explosion with an injury. But the commission withdrew the enforcement case and dismissed it without a fine. The commission maintains that Atmos achieved compliance.

Atmos response: Atmos said it didn’t initially receive written notice of the alleged violations and got an extension to respond, then said it had provided the information sought by the commission. The company settled a lawsuit filed by the girl’s family.

Read the enforcement case file »
March 2, 2015

9430 Eloise St., Dallas, Texas

What happened: A 77-year-old woman and her adult grandson received minor injuries when the house exploded after someone flipped on a light switch. Investigators found natural gas had leaked from lines at a nearby home and migrated into the sewer line.

Railroad Commission decision: The commission alleged Atmos violated rules by not having a plan in place to replace failing pipes in the area, but proposed no fine. Atmos replaced the home’s service line in addition to 20 others in the area and more than 1,000 feet of plastic mains in the area.

Atmos response: Previous damage to the home’s gas service pipe was caused by digging from other parties, not Atmos. The commission agreed.

Read the investigation report »

Sept. 21, 2015

113 Arabian Road, Waxahachie, Texas

What happened: A builder in a Waxahachie neighborhood requested line-locating services from various utilities, including Atmos. The gas utility hired a contractor to locate and mark its lines. A subcontractor hired by AT&T to install fiber optic lines hit Atmos Energy’s gas lines while digging. Gas leaked into the sewer lines. Four days later, a house exploded when a woman inside turned on her electric stove to cook a meal. Two people inside were badly injured, one other had minor injuries. The blast structurally damaged five other houses nearby. The homeowners said they were never warned about the gas leak.

Victims: Two people were injured.

Railroad Commission decision: Initially proposed fining Atmos as much as $97,500 for “very serious safety violations,” including allegedly not providing a response in the required time frame and its locator not marking lines accurately. In the end, the commission allowed Atmos to settle the case for $1,750. The contractor who hit the gas lines was fined $78,000.

Atmos response: Did not admit fault, paid fine and settled lawsuit by homeowners.

Read the enforcement case file »
March 11, 2016
1511 W. 13th Ave., Corsicana, Texas

What happened: A house that never had gas service exploded one night, sending family members to the hospital with minor injuries. Investigators found a gas leak from a joint where plastic pipes were fused together underground at a nearby trailer park. The gas migrated and seeped into the home through the bathtub and slab before the explosion.

Railroad Commission decision: The commission found Atmos followed its emergency plan and procedures and did not refer the case for enforcement or propose a fine.

Atmos response: Atmos repaired the leak.

Read the investigation report »

Jan. 1, 2018
3567 Colgate Lane, Irving, Texas

What happened: Atmos crews came to the neighborhood on New Year’s Eve after people called 911 to report the strong smell of gas. A woman in the home asked crew members if the family should evacuate and was told no. Irving firefighters said they were also told evacuation was unnecessary. The family went to bed; the house exploded a few hours later. The residents escaped without injury. Investigators found a gas leak on a nearby 6-inch gas main at a mechanical coupling used to join plastic pipes.

Railroad Commission decision: The commission fined Atmos $16,000, saying that the company had failed to continuously monitor the leak to see if homes needed evacuating, and that a part on the leaking gas main hadn’t been installed properly to withstand wear and tear.

Atmos response: The company paid the fine but admitted no violations and said the cause of the accident is still undetermined.

Read the preliminary investigation report »
Feb. 23, 2018

3534 Espanola Drive, Dallas, Texas

What happened: The one-story house exploded shortly before 7 a.m. Linda Rogers, 12, was getting ready for school and died from her injuries in the blast. Investigators found a crack all the way around a 2-inch steel pipe in back of the house, along with several other gas leaks in the neighborhood. Two days before that fatal blast, Atmos crews had gone out to investigate gas-related fires at two homes that shared an alley with the Rogers house. Atmos did not inform neighbors about any gas leaks or evacuate homes before the blast.

Victims: Linda Rogers, 12, was killed. Four people were injured.

Railroad Commission decision: The commission is still investigating the incident, as is the National Transportation Safety Board.

Atmos response: Atmos officials have attributed the disaster to a confluence of heavy rains and unique soil conditions and geology.

Read the preliminary NTSB report »

April 22, 2018

900 O’Neal Drive, Caldwell, Texas

What happened: A gas explosion occurred at the home just before midnight; the 92-year-old man who lived there escaped but suffered serious burns. Investigators found a leak on a steel service line that ran under the street to a neighbor’s house. The victim has said in court records that he intends to file a lawsuit against Atmos, alleging negligence.

Victims: One person was injured.

Railroad Commission decision: The commission is still investigating the accident.

Atmos response: In court records, Atmos Energy denies any negligence in the accident.

Read a preliminary investigation report »
Gas leak near your home? A Dallas lawmaker thinks you should know

By Cary Aspinwall and Holly K. Hacker

Published Jan. 17, 2018

Updated on Jan. 17: Revised to include additional comments and information about the proposed bills.

Texas homeowners would know much sooner about dangerous gas leaks in their neighborhoods — and gas companies would have until late 2020 to replace older, decaying pipes — under legislation proposed by a Dallas lawmaker.

State Rep. Rafael Anchia on Wednesday filed a sweeping reform package — 11 bills total — that attempts to hold natural gas companies more accountable and prevent tragedies like the gas explosion that killed Linda Rogers last year in northwest Dallas.

“A 12-year-old girl was blown up while sleeping in her home,” Anchia said. “An entire community is grieving and we must never let this happen again. My proposals would increase transparency and public safety and hold bad actors accountable.”

The child’s home sat in the lawmaker's district.

Many of the Democrat’s proposals seek to
Fix problems identified in an investigation by *The Dallas Morning News* last September, examining regulatory failings and gas leak explosions on Atmos Energy’s pipelines.

One bill would give Atmos and other gas companies 72 hours to alert neighbors after a leak is discovered in their neighborhood. Companies would have to give written notice in both English and Spanish. There’s no such requirement now.

Another measure would require gas companies to publish online maps showing the exact location of leaks. Currently, gas companies must file reports with the state every six months listing where leaks were discovered and repaired, but most people don’t even know that information exists.

*The News’ investigation began* after Linda died in the February 2018 explosion. Two other gas fires/explosions had occurred near her home, and *Atmos was investigating leaks in her neighborhood the night before she died*. But it did not cut off gas service or evacuate the area.

Reports showed a gas leak was discovered behind her home nearly two months before her house exploded. Her death is still under federal investigation. *The News’* reporting found that leaking natural gas lines operated by Atmos Energy in north and central Texas *had blown up more than two dozen homes since 2006*, killing nine people and injuring at least 22.

Another bill would force companies to speed up replacement of leak-prone pipe — cast iron, wrought iron and bare steel — by Dec. 31, 2020. Atmos Energy has previously said it was working to remove all cast iron pipe on its Mid-Tex system, which includes Dallas, by 2021.
Last year, Atmos began replacing pipelines in a large swath of northwest Dallas after finding many more leaks in the area. Several homeowners complained publicly that they didn't know about the leaks or replacements going on near them.

An Atmos spokeswoman said the company needed time to review the specific language in the bills, but looked forward to "working with Rep. Anchia on legislation that would further advance our shared goal of being the safest provider of natural gas."

Also, Atmos said this week that it wants to charge Dallas customers higher rates to help offset its costs last year to replace aging pipes and gas service lines.

The Railroad Commission declined to comment on the bills. Its main priority is protecting the public and environment, agency spokeswoman Ramona Nye said Thursday. She said it vigorously enforces state rules and expects gas pipeline operators to follow them.

Some of Anchia’s reform measures have been suggested before, only to be repeatedly rejected by lawmakers. For instance, one bill would simply rename the Railroad Commission, which hasn’t overseen trains since 2005. Lawmakers have filed bills every session during the last decade to rechristen it. That still hasn’t happened.

Another Anchia bill would limit when the agency’s three elected commissioners can accept campaign contributions. For example, they couldn’t take money from companies with a contested case before the commission.
The Legislature considered, but ultimately rejected, a similar bill by Sen. Robert Nichols in 2013.

“Perception is very important — we need our citizens to feel like things are being run on the up and up,” said Nichols, a Republican who represents 19 counties in East Texas. He noted that he and other state lawmakers can’t take donations right before, during or right after the legislative session.

Will 2019 be any different? It’s hard to say.

Nichols said that he hadn’t read all of Anchia’s bills, but that he still supports the name change and the campaign donation limits.

“We always care about public safety, whether it be pipelines, highways, whatever,” he said. It’s a question of tradeoffs, he added -- weighing any extra burden and costs of such proposals against the potential benefits.

“We have to make choices,” Nichols said.

Follow Cary Aspinwall and Holly K. Hacker on Twitter at @caryaspinwall and @hollyhacker.
How Dallas lawmaker Rafael Anchia hopes to prevent the next deadly gas-leak explosion

By Cary Aspinwall

Published Dec. 19, 2018

A Texas lawmaker said Tuesday that he was drafting legislation to boost oversight of natural gas companies and to prevent leaky-pipeline explosions such as the one that killed a 12-year-old girl in northwest Dallas earlier this year.

State Rep. Rafael Anchia said he would target several of the problems highlighted in a September investigation by The Dallas Morning News that examined regulatory failings and gas leak explosions on Atmos Energy’s pipelines.

“The News’ reporting helped identify important gaps in law and rule,” the Dallas Democrat said. “We need to plug the holes in the regulatory regime so there’s more accountability in the entire system.”

Anchia, chairman of the House Committee on International Trade and Intergovernmental Affairs, said he wants to speed up replacement of aging pipelines that are vulnerable to leaks.
and pose significant threats to public safety, the environment and taxpayers’ pocketbooks.

He also wants to strengthen the enforcement muscle of the Texas Railroad Commission, the agency that regulates gas utilities.

*The News’ series found that the commission had repeatedly let Atmos off the hook* with little or no penalty, even after explosions that killed people.

It also documented widespread damage. Leaking natural gas lines operated by Atmos Energy in north and central Texas *had blown up more than two dozen homes since 2006*, killing nine people and injuring at least 22.

One of those killed was Linda Rogers, 12, whose home sits in Anchia’s district. The girl, known as Michellita to family and friends, was getting ready for school early on Feb. 23 when her home exploded.

Atmos had been working on gas lines in the area the night before, records show, but did *not cut off gas or evacuate* nearby homes. Utility right-of-way permits show the company *had identified a leak in the alley behind Rogers’ home* more than a month before her home exploded.

Anchia wants the state to boost fines for safety violations. While Atmos’ Mid-Tex division was cited for more than 2,000 alleged safety violations in the past decade, records showed it *paid only $250,000 in penalties.*
The lawmaker also wants to require gas companies to report leaks to the public in real time with an interactive, searchable map.

Currently, the state requires Atmos and other companies to report leaks they’ve repaired only every six months — and the utilities don’t publish the locations in searchable maps for the public.

Making sure independent investigators respond to gas explosions quickly, especially to incidents involving injuries or deaths, is another priority, he said. The News’ investigation detailed several incidents in which Atmos didn’t immediately report explosions involving gas leaks.

Anchia said his office was drafting several bills that would, among other steps, aim to force gas companies such as Atmos to accelerate the replacement of aging cast iron and steel pipe.

The News’ investigation showed more than a third of Atmos Energy’s pipes were installed before 1940. Among the country’s larger operators, only one — in Philadelphia — had such a significant share of old pipes, The News found.

Dallas County Judge Clay Jenkins said he was hopeful that Anchia’s efforts would improve accountability and save lives. Jenkins has been advocating for a gas-leak map for months. Homeowners should be notified as soon as possible when a gas leak is found in their area, he said.

“What I hope happens is more transparency for homeowners and residents here,” Jenkins said.

Marquette Wolf, a lawyer representing Rogers’ family in a lawsuit against Atmos, supports any reform effort that would help protect the public from threats of natural gas leaks such as those in Atmos’ lines.
Atmos has maintained that it always repairs hazardous leaks as required by state law and is committed to operating safely. The Railroad Commission told The News in a prior statement that public safety is its highest priority.

Follow Cary Aspinwall on Twitter at @caryaspinwall.
Atmos' gas leaks go far beyond one northwest Dallas neighborhood. See how bad the problem is

By Holly K. Hacker, Allan James Vestal and Cary Aspinwall
Published July 29, 2018

A sharp increase in natural gas leaks has plagued neighborhoods across North Texas this year, from Irving to Oak Cliff to Preston Hollow.

Large swaths of north and northwest Dallas had more hazardous leaks during the first half of 2018 than in any year since 2015, according to a Dallas Morning News analysis of data filed with state regulators by Atmos Energy Corp.

These leaks — the most serious type, which required immediate fixes — were reported along neighborhood gas lines that snake through working-class areas between Dallas’ two major airports, as well as tony North Dallas streets dotted with multimillion-dollar homes.

Atmos found so many natural gas leaks in northwest Dallas that it now plans to replace a pipeline network covering an area more than four times the size of White Rock Lake.
This gas line replacement extends well beyond the northwest Dallas neighborhood where leaks fueled three explosions and fires in February, including one that killed 12-year-old Linda Rogers. Those blasts launched a federal investigation and prompted Atmos Energy to replace aging pipelines to 2,800 homes in that neighborhood.

Since then, Atmos has done more frequent searches for gas leaks in the Dallas area using high-tech tools, the company said in a statement Friday.

"As would be expected, the result has been a higher number of found and repaired leaks ultimately enhancing the safety of our system," the statement said.

Our data analysis reveals potential widespread problems with aging and wear and tear in the gas delivery system running under customers’ homes and businesses all over Dallas County.

Of the 3,100 leaks Atmos reported in Dallas County during the first half of 2018, nearly 1,400 were deemed hazardous — the type most likely to cause explosions and fires if not repaired quickly. These kind of leaks have destroyed dozens of homes in Texas, sometimes injuring or killing people.

For our analysis, The News excluded the roughly 600 hazardous leaks caused by digging mistakes or car crashes. We focused on the remaining 800 hazardous leaks that Atmos attributed to all other causes. The most common were stripped pipe threads, corrosion, and aging or failing parts.

Across Dallas County, this subset of dangerous gas leaks more than tripled during the first half of 2018 compared with the first half of 2017, The News found.

Our analysis identified clusters of leaks that were repaired near Preston Hollow Elementary School; between the Trinity Groves and Sylvan Thirty developments in West Dallas; and along rail lines east of the downtown Irving DART station.
The majority of hazardous leaks The News analyzed happened on steel or plastic pipe. Atmos has pledged to rid its North Texas system of older cast iron pipes by 2021.

The state requires natural gas companies to report each January and July the number of leaks they repaired during the prior six months, along with the leak locations and other details. The reports do not include leaks that have yet to be repaired.
When The News first asked Atmos about the rise in leaks, the company posted an announcement on its website touting its commitment to safety and asserting that it fixes hazardous leaks quickly. Atmos said it found “isolated areas” with a high number of leaks outside the northwest Dallas neighborhood of Midway Hollow, but did not say where.

More neighborhoods affected

Gas utility crews surrounded by orange cones and road signs have become common sights in several neighborhoods west of the Dallas North Tollway and south of the LBJ Freeway.

That’s an area The News identified as having a sharp increase in hazardous gas leaks so far in 2018.

In March, Mary Jane Mackenna woke to a ringing doorbell at 5:30 a.m. at her northwest Dallas home near Royal Lane and Aladdin Drive.

Men in orange vests were scrambling in her yard, with six work trucks behind them. They had found a dangerous leak near the curb in front of her oak tree, and immediately began working to fix it.

She wondered if she needed to evacuate, but was told she could stay in her home while crews dug up her yard and replaced a leaking steel pipe with a more durable, flexible plastic one.

The gas leak in her yard was fixed quickly since it was the most hazardous type. But she wondered: What about my neighbors? Are their gas lines leaking, too?

Other types of leaks can linger longer under state regulations, which troubles Mackenna.
“You mean they don’t have to fix all of them right away?” she said. “What they need to do is replace everybody’s lines. They were supposed to do this a long time ago.”

The News found several hazardous leaks reported in Mackenna’s neighborhood that were repaired the same month as hers. Now, Atmos Energy plans to replace her entire neighborhood’s pipelines and much of those in the surrounding area by 2019, according to a report the company gave to state regulators this month.

When The News asked Atmos last week if customers in those neighborhoods had been notified of this plan, Atmos declined to answer. The next day, the company posted its announcement online and emailed several Dallas City Council members to notify them.

“The NW Dallas distribution system is operating safely as it had been performing in the months and years before February and March 2018,” Atmos said in that statement.

Dallas City Council member Jennifer Gates, whose district is in part of the planned replacement area, said she was notified about two months ago that Atmos might upgrade gas lines across a large swath of northwest Dallas.

“It would have been nice if this had been replaced before we started having all the leaks,” Gates said. “But the response now, that’s what needs to be done. My concern is we follow through and make sure everything is repaired.”
An aging system

Atmos inherited an aging system when it acquired Lone Star Gas Co. from TXU in 2004, said Geoffrey Gay, a lawyer who represents more than 150 cities in rate negotiations with the utility.

“I suspect there’s a lot of old pipe out there that is desperate to be replaced,” Gay said.

Upgrading the entire system is likely to send customers’ gas bills higher, he said.

Atmos Energy, based in Dallas, is among the country’s largest natural gas distributors, serving more than 3 million utility customers in eight states. Officials said the company has invested $3 billion since 2005 to upgrade its Mid-Tex system, which includes north and central Texas.

Atmos plans to replace 292 miles of gas distribution pipes on that network in 2018, according to reports filed with state regulators.

In a July 12 letter to state officials about the increase in leaks, company executives said “a constructive rate environment is necessary” to fund improvements.

Last year, Atmos secured permission from state regulators to get more than $9 million in increased rates from customers. This year, the company initially asked for a $6.3 million increase but agreed to settle for far less after receiving a massive federal tax break.

Atmos maintains the 2018 surge in leaks for its north and central Texas system is largely due to clusters of “abnormal, sudden and unexplained” leaks in one part of northwest Dallas. This includes the neighborhood where three houses were destroyed by fires and an explosion in
February. Atmos said it found more leaks there in one week of 2018 than in all of 2015, 2016 or 2017.

The company has blamed this phenomenon on heavy rains and “unique” soil and geology conditions in the area.

But that wasn’t the only area The News found with more leaks: In Preston Hollow (the north Dallas ZIP code 75230), there were 40 leaks in the first half of 2018, compared with 39 dangerous leaks in all of 2015 to 2017. (Excavation damage caused an additional 10 hazardous leaks in the first half of 2018 and about 50 leaks from 2015 to 2017.)

While Atmos was replacing leak-riddled pipelines in the neighborhood where Linda Rogers died, it was monitoring other areas of Dallas with high-tech leak detection equipment described as a thousand times more powerful than traditional tools.

As for the exact areas that Atmos monitored, the company said it included ones where The News found a notable increase in hazardous leaks.

The recent rise in gas leaks isn’t necessarily a bad thing, as Atmos sees it.

“Finding and repairing leaks is evidence that we operate our system safely,” the company said in a statement.

The News asked Atmos what specific leak technology it is currently using in Dallas and throughout Texas, and whether it’s the "state-of-the-art" detection equipment the utility told regulators it used this past March.
The company did not answer those specific questions, saying only it "continuously evaluates and incorporates new, more sensitive technology into its leak surveys."

Staff writer Robert Wilonsky contributed to this report.
Did Atmos heed 'warning signs' before deadly gas explosion?

By Cary Aspinwall, Holly K. Hacker and Jennifer Emily

Published March 25, 2018

Updated on April 20: Revised with details about the call Linda Rogers’ mother made to Atmos before the explosion.

After a natural gas explosion killed a 12-year-old girl in February, Atmos Energy described leaks caused by corrosion of its steel gas lines in northwest Dallas as "sudden and unexplainable." The utility repeatedly blamed heavy rains and “unique” soil composition for the disaster.

But records obtained by The Dallas Morning News show that more than a month before Linda Rogers died, Atmos found a leak in the alley running behind her home, obtained permits and hired contractors to fix it.

Atmos applied for a city permit on Jan. 11 for “emergency repair activity” to gas lines, records show. The permit lists two contractors and excavation plans — but it doesn’t show when and if the work was completed. Atmos said it made repairs by Jan. 29.

The city issued Atmos the permit on Jan. 18; less than a quarter-inch of rain had fallen at that point. Then nearly 6 inches of rain drenched Dallas in the days leading up to the Feb. 23 explosion.

"Atmos ignored all of the warning signs," said the lawyer, Marquette Wolf. "It wasn’t just foreseeable, it was predictable based on the information they had."
Initially, a lawyer for the family said Linda’s mother called Atmos days before the explosion to report smelling gas at their home on Espanola Drive. Lawyers now say she called for another reason.

Atmos executives declined to answer questions about any calls the Rogers family made, citing a continuing investigation by the National Transportation Safety Board. A spokesman for the board declined to comment.

Last week, Atmos executives visited The News to discuss their efforts to be “more transparent” with customers.

“I can’t comment on what we did or didn’t do in that leak,” said David Park, senior vice president for utility operations. “We don’t let a hazard last for a month, we eliminate the hazard immediately” if it is the most dangerous kind of leak, known as grade 1.

Company executives brought with them John Bryant, a consultant with a background in civil engineering and geology, who attributed the damaged pipes to a “unique area of geology” formed by river sediments and the Austin Chalk and Eagle Ford Shale formations.

“It was a confluence of events that created a unique problem,” Bryant said. “There would be no way they could have predicted what would happen.”
Federal investigators are trying to determine what caused the Feb. 23 explosion on Espanola Drive, and whether it's connected to gas-related house fires on nearby Durango Drive on Feb. 21 and 22.

In a preliminary report Friday, the NTSB said Atmos was first aware of gas leaks in the neighborhood Jan. 1. Atmos said it repaired that first leak, a non-hazardous one, in January by installing new plastic pipes. The report said that Atmos also had made various repairs before and during the days of the three house fires and explosions.

Since then, Atmos has discovered many other leaks in the Midway Hollow neighborhood and is replacing the entire gas distribution system. Government inspectors deemed the network there — lines that serve about 2,800 customers — “too dangerous to operate.”

Neighbors in Midway Hollow were never told that Atmos was repairing gas lines in the alley behind their homes before the explosion. Atmos told The News it is not required by law to do so, and it usually doesn’t.

“Our team’s focus and responsibility is to repair that leak,” Atmos CEO Michael Haefner said.

A News analysis shows the company can take weeks or even months to fully repair the most dangerous types of gas leaks, those known as grade 1.

Atmos took more than a month to completely repair 76 leaks in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, according to Texas Railroad Commission data that covers 2013 through 2017. The commission regulates energy operations in the state.

Another 800 hazardous leaks over those...
years took between one week and one month to repair, records show.

Altogether, 5 percent of hazardous leaks took more than a week to fix. Leaks attributed to corrosion took noticeably longer to repair, with 15 percent of them taking more than a week.

The state requires that hazardous leaks be fixed promptly so they’re no longer a danger. Atmos officials say they do just that.

“We take action immediately to eliminate the hazard, make repairs and monitor as required by law,” said Elizabeth Beauchamp, vice president of public affairs for Atmos.

In some cases, workers make a temporary fix and then come back for a permanent repair, such as replacing a whole section of pipe. It’s that final repair date that gets reported to the state, Beauchamp said.

Company officials would not say whether that was the case for the leak reported in January in the alley behind Linda Rogers’ house.

Atmos and other gas operators must keep records showing they address hazardous leaks promptly, but they’re not required to file those records with the state, said Ramona Nye, a spokeswoman for the Railroad Commission of Texas.

State inspectors review full leak repair records as part of their oversight duties, Nye said.

Matthew Fowler said he called Atmos in 2014 after he smelled gas while driving down the alley behind his home in Richardson, just north of Dallas.

Records show Atmos took 46 days to repair the grade 1 leak on the plastic gas line behind his house.

"It was almost like a lackadaisical sense of urgency, if that makes any sense," Fowler said. "It was like, 'We know it's important, but we'll get to it when we can.'"
The News found at least one case where a grade 1 leak took more than 160 days to completely repair.

Atmos has touted its goal of being "the safest provider of natural gas services," and said it has invested $3 billion in replacing aging infrastructure since 2005.

Over the same time period, Atmos reported double-digit increases in profits nearly every year and paid its shareholders $1.7 billion in dividends.

Cast iron pipes tend to be the oldest, and nearly half of states — not including Texas — have eliminated them altogether because of safety concerns. Steel pipes became the preferred choice starting in the 1950s. Nowadays plastic pipes, which don't succumb to corrosion as easily, are most common.

The News has repeatedly asked Atmos to provide a map showing where the steel, cast iron and plastic pipelines are throughout the metro area. The company has declined to release anything other than a general color-coded map, without street names.

"There's nothing wrong with steel pipes," Park, the Atmos executive, told The News. "The system is safe; steel pipes are safe."

Around 2010, the Railroad Commission of Texas considered making gas utilities replace all 2.2 million steel lines with plastic, following several explosions in North Texas.
In 2011, the commission instead adopted a comprehensive pipeline safety rule requiring all Texas natural gas distribution companies to survey their pipeline distribution systems for the greatest potential threats for failure and make plans to replace them.

The commission rule stated: "If steel service lines are determined to be the greatest risk in a distribution system, an operator must implement a replacement schedule for these lines."

Reports show the company has replaced more than 2,200 miles of transmission and distribution lines since 2014.

Atmos also plans to replace the remaining 400 miles of cast iron pipes in the Dallas area with plastic, and has already replaced 400 miles of cast iron pipes, officials said.

The company has regularly asked for rate hikes in recent years to pay for repairs and upgrades.

Replacing steel pipelines in North Texas will take decades, executives said.

"Is it fast enough?" asked Haefner, the Atmos CEO. "That's a good debate to have."

Staff writers Stephanie Lamm and Jeff Mosier contributed to this story.
Atmos investigated gas leaks night before fatal Dallas explosion, didn't cut off service or evacuate

By Cary Aspinwall and Jennifer Emily

Published March 9, 2018

The evening before a house exploded in northwest Dallas and killed a 12-year-old girl, Atmos Energy crews were investigating and repairing gas leaks directly behind the house, company emails obtained by The Dallas Morning News show.

And in the two days after the home blew up, Atmos discovered at least 28 leaks in the neighborhood, the emails show.

About 12 hours before the explosion, an email from an Atmos Energy employee to the Texas Railroad Commission described how the company had been “monitoring a situation in a residential area of Dallas near Love Field airport.” Atmos was investigating two separate leaks involving house fires, and “measured gas was potentially a factor in both.”

The email continued: “Atmos crews are continuing to monitor the surrounding area for potential leaks and will make repairs as needed.” The fires occurred Feb. 21 and 22.

The company did not evacuate residents or shut off gas distribution lines until after the Feb. 23 explosion knocked a home off its foundation on Espanola Drive, killing Linda Rogers, known as “Michellita” to family and friends. It wasn't until Feb. 26 that the entire neighborhood was evacuated and Atmos cut off service to 2,800 residents.

Atmos is replacing steel pipes, which can be more vulnerable than other types to leaks.
The News obtained the emails, among other records, through an open records request to the Texas Railroad Commission, which regulates and investigates pipeline safety. The National Transportation Safety Board is also examining the explosion.

Gaye McElwain, a spokeswoman for the Railroad Commission, declined to comment on whether Atmos followed all safety precautions before Rogers was killed.

“Those issues are still under investigation,” she said via email. “Pipeline safety staff was sharing the best information available at the time with other staff members during a quickly developing situation to ensure we responded with the personnel and resources necessary to protect the public.”

Shortly after the house on Espanola Drive exploded, Stephanie Weidman of the commission told other agency employees in an email that Atmos had called the night before and said that a nearby home fire was “due to cooking.”

Atmos was checking for leaks in the area “per their emergency response procedures and found indications of a leak and repaired the leak last night,” Weidman wrote. “This house explosion is in the same neighborhood, but is not near the house that had the house fire last night.”

That account was incorrect: While the house fires and explosion were on different streets — Durango and Espanola Drives — they are both in the 3500 block and are separated by only an alley.
Weidman referred a request for comment to the commission’s media office.

Atmos declined to answer questions from *The News* about these emails, referring questions to the federal safety board. Officials there could not be reached.

Atmos also *wouldn’t say* whether proper safety protocols were followed after the first leaks were detected, such as whether the neighborhood should have been evacuated or alerted to the leaks. Nor would the company say how many more leaks had been found in the neighborhood.

Carl Weimer, executive director of the Washington-based nonprofit Pipeline Safety Trust, said it was unusual that Atmos seemed “caught unaware” about the larger safety problems in the neighborhood after two house fires.

He said more information was needed to determine whether Atmos acted properly. The trust focuses on operational pipeline safety in the public interest.

Neighbors said they *smelled gas* before the explosion.

Jesus Colorado lives a few houses down from the Rogers home on Espanola. He said his own house shook when one of the house fires ignited. “It felt like an explosion,” not just a kitchen fire, he said.

Neighbors saw fire trucks and caution tape put up afterward. They also noticed road cones and work crews in the area but thought it might be an issue with storm drainage because of heavy rains that week, Colorado said.
“Nobody said anything about the gas” to him or his family, he said.

Atmos has blamed the explosion on weather, shifting clay soil and aging steel pipes. The company refused to identify other Dallas neighborhoods that might have potentially dangerous steel or cast iron pipes.

Just four hours before the explosion, Atmos crews checked a gas leak in Juan Armilla’s back yard. Armilla lives on Durango, the street where the two houses caught fire.

“That could’ve been my kid flown across the room instead of their kid,” Armilla said, leaning against a pickup a few blocks from his house. “I’m the one who had the gas leak in the back yard.”

John Barr, an attorney for Linda’s family, said Friday that Atmos should have evacuated the neighborhood after the fires one street over from Linda’s house.

“If you think it’s bad, why in the Sam Hill aren’t you evacuating people?” Barr said. “Why would you leave that little girl and her family in distress when they knew? They knew.”

Barr said Atmos crews were on Linda’s block when the house exploded: “They got there before the fire department.”

Staff writers Holly Hacker and Dana Branham contributed to this story.