

PG&E does an about face, will provide detailed maps of gas pipelines to Bay Area fire departments

Paul Rogers and Matthias Gafni, Bay Area News Group, 10-6-10

After weeks of insisting that it could not for security reasons provide maps to Bay Area fire departments showing the locations of shut-off valves to its natural gas transmission pipelines, Pacific Gas & Electric has reversed course and now will disclose the information.

PG&E officials notified San Jose leaders and Contra Costa County supervisors late Monday of the change.

The utility will provide detailed maps of its natural gas transmission lines -- with the locations of shut-off valves -- to police, fire and emergency agencies in cities and counties that request them, said PG&E spokeswoman Katie Romans.

PG&E is asking departments not to make the maps public, she added.

Asked why the utility changed policy after saying as recently as Friday that the information was so sensitive it had to be kept secret, even from emergency response agencies, Romans said:

"Rather than a change in policy, I'd characterize it as an evolution in the ongoing conversation."

PG&E was facing growing political pressure, however.

San Jose Mayor Chuck Reed said Tuesday that he contacted Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's office after PG&E officials told his fire chief, public works director and planning director they couldn't have copies of the most detailed maps. The governor's staff then contacted PG&E, Reed said.

"It's good news. It's important for our public safety personnel to know where those valves are,"

Reed said. "I'm pleased they are making the information available, although we understand the need to keep it closely held."

Some PG&E critics were more blunt.

"So they're not completely tone deaf. This is great progress," said Michael Florio, an attorney for The Utility Reform Network, a San Francisco consumer group.

"To say you can't tell the fire chief because of national security seemed a little perverse to me."

In the aftermath of the San Bruno pipeline explosion Sept. 9 that killed eight people and destroyed 37 homes, shut-off valves have become a key issue. PG&E said it took its crews 1 hour and 46 minutes to turn off the gas to the ruptured pipeline as it incinerated the neighborhood.

Crews had to drive through rush-hour traffic, find the aging valves -- one under a manhole cover and the other in a locked building -- and then turn cranks by hand to shut off the gas.

Reed said even though PG&E crews are trained to turn the valves off, Bay Area firefighters may need to help in the event of a massive earthquake or other disaster where several neighborhoods could be burning at once.

"Our firefighters are really skilled, highly trained people," Reed said. "We wouldn't operate the valves without appropriate training from PG&E. But when the big one comes, PG&E is likely to be overwhelmed."

Contra Costa officials had put similar pressure on PG&E.

On Tuesday, the Contra Costa County board of supervisors scheduled a special vote on a measure to ask the California Public Utilities Commission to force PG&E to release more information about pipeline locations and valves.

Contra Costa Supervisor John Gioia had asked PG&E officials to meet with him after the San Bruno disaster. In a Sept. 28 meeting with county officials in Gioia's office, PG&E representatives rolled out a map detailing precise locations of gas transmission lines in western Contra Costa and Alameda counties, many crisscrossing the Hayward Fault, and shut-off valves.

When asked for a copy of the map, the PG&E officials declined, calling the documents "proprietary" and a "security issue," Gioia said.

"I think they were sympathetic and knew they would be helpful, but they were worried they would get out publicly," Gioia said. Contra Costa officials told PG&E they would treat the maps as Homeland Security documents, making no copies and keeping them out of the public eye.

PG&E officials also said they would not want firefighters or county workers shutting the valves off.

Contra Costa Fire Battalion Chief Kevin McCarthy attended the meeting.

"Our knowledge of where valves are is really limited, as is our understanding of where the pipelines run," McCarthy said. "In an emergency, it would help in knowing what areas to evacuate and what evacuation recovery areas we should send people to."

Contra Costa Fire Chief Daryl Louder said that in a disaster knowing whether a valve is remote-activated or manual would provide first responders an idea on how long the fuel source might last, he said.

Meanwhile, PG&E also has announced that residential customers can now see maps showing how close natural gas transmission lines are to their homes. Customers can go to www.pge.com and create an online account under the 'my account' section. There they can see Google maps showing the locations of gas lines and which, if any, are on the utility's "Top 100" list for priority upgrades. Customers also can call PG&E at 888-743-7431 for the information.