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## State of Emergency Declared in Moraga

By Sophie Braccini



Photo Andy Scheck

The Town of Moraga declared a State of Emergency last week following the March 13 collapse of a section of road at the corner of Rheem Boulevard and Moraga Road that led to the rupture of a gas line, causing gas outages to 2,600 customers and sparking fears of a major disaster.

The declaration is a necessary step to get access to emergency funding from the county, the state and Federal Emergency Management Agency.

On the afternoon of Sunday March 13, pavement and sidewalk started to collapse and a traffic light sank into a large sinkhole, 15-feet wide by 20-long by 15-feet deep. Portions of the sidewalk punctured the four-inch gas line that runs through the neighborhood, causing the immediate evacuation of nearby shopping centers and an order of "shelter in place" to nearby residents.

"I got a call from one of the police officers," said interim Town Manager Bob Priebe. "I was on site within minutes and immediately activated the Emergency Operation Center." (See story page A5) PG&E, which had mobilized 200 employees, had to shut off the gas line. "It took them quite a while to decide how to ultimately shut off the gas," said Priebe. A massive PG&E electric switch vault had to be deactivated before access could be granted. He said PG&E had to go to each of the 2,600 impacted homes and businesses to manually turn off the gas lines and then turn them back on (when gas service was restored). Some residents were without hot water and heat for more than 48 hours.

After the incident many people expressed their satisfaction at the way PG&E handled the situation. Edward Silicani said PG&E employees were "terrific, professional and courteous."

Dave Diamond agreed and added that the PG&E employees not only re-lit all gas appliances, the water heater, stove, fireplace insert and furnace, they also checked the water heater for leaks and inspected the furnace.

However, some residents were frustrated by the utility's performance. John Tarman, who lives on Goodfellow Drive, said his gas was off for a day and a half.

"There was no information from PG&E at first, but we realized that our gas was off. The next morning, we received two calls from PG&E. Neither party seemed to have the information. They were inconsistent on the cause and the number of homes affected. We were a little disappointed, but not surprised."

Others tried to make an adventure of the ordeal. "It was interesting being without gas," said Sharon Metcalf, who lives on Birchwood Drive. "I cooked dinner on the barbecue, almost like camping out. We made hot water on the barbecue to wash up, it was rather fun. People should be prepared for when an earthquake comes, they will be without gas, hot water and maybe even electric."

It was a similar incident, a broken gas line that resulted in the San Bruno fire in 2010.

The Town confirmed on Friday, after staff, consultants and PG&E representatives had inspected the hole, that there was a "virtual spaghetti bowl" of utilities in the hole at this corner, including, but not limited to, a 96-inch storm drain corrugated metal pipe, a 27-inch reinforced concrete storm drain, a bank of Comcast conduits filled with fiber optic lines, traffic signal electrical lines, the four-inch PG&E natural gas pipe, and two unclaimed utility pipes. Adjacent to the hole are a 15-inch Central San sewer vitrified clay pipe and a 12-inch EBMUD water line. In plain sight appeared the severed storm drain, the PG&E electrical vault that had collapsed, cables and a lot of debris.

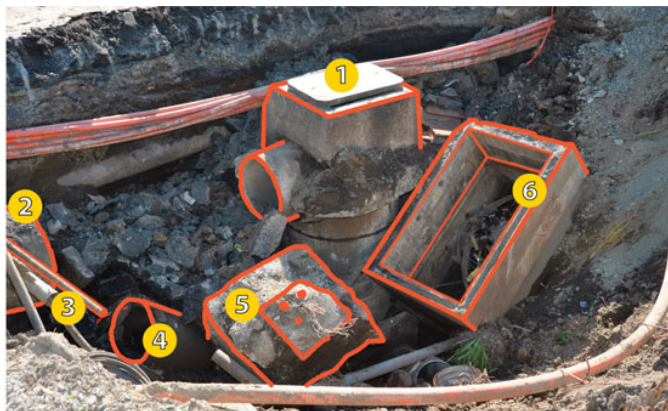
According to a statement, the Town's contractor has made every effort to protect these utilities in place to ensure service is maintained. However, the presence of the utilities will complicate the repair process as it moves forward. Crews also made preparations on Friday to protect the hole against runoff from impending rains.

When asking for the State of Emergency on March 16, Moraga Public Works Director Edric Kwan also asked the town council for emergency funding to start the investigation of the incident and repairs. "We want to appropriate \$500,000 immediately," said Kwan.

The State of Emergency will allow Kwan to bypass the normal procurement procedures and immediately assemble a team to work on investigation, then repairs, including hiring of Siteworks Construction, the contractor that had past experience working on a similar sinkhole that occurred in the vicinity.

Ten years ago, another sinkhole formed at the opposite corner of Rheem Blvd and Moraga Road. "It was one of the welding point of the 96-inch storm drain that broke off," remembered Jill Mercurio, who was the public works director at the time. Mercurio also declared a State of Emergency then, but she said that the funds allocated in such circumstance can only be used to repair the immediate cause of the incident. "We received funding to just repair that junction and repave over it," said Mercurio, "there was absolutely no funds for betterment of the situation."

Although the March 13 incident occurred during a hard El Niño-driven rainstorm, Kwan was very cautious not to hypothesize the reason why this second incident happened. He wants the investigation to be completed before pointing to a culprit.



1: Entrance to main storm drain 2: Broken parallel to Rheem Blvd. storm drain 3: Broken gas line 4: Part of #2 fell down in sinkhole 5: Foundation of the traffic light that sunk into the hole 6: Electrical box placed on sidewalk that fell into the hole

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