

Steam pipe explosion in Manhattan spreads asbestos

By Sandy English
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On Thursday morning, a huge explosion from a steam pipe in lower Manhattan's Flatiron District sent a geyser of smoke, steam and debris over 70 feet into the air. The 20-inch pipe, operated by the energy provider Consolidated Edison and installed in 1932, was lined with asbestos. The substance, a known carcinogen, contaminated nearly 30 buildings. In addition to the spread of asbestos, Fire Department Commissioner Daniel Nigro reported, "not only did the steam line burst, but it caused a disruption of a gas line, a water main and some electrical power." Days after the explosion, the area remains covered in mud and debris.

While no one was seriously injured, over 500 people from 49 buildings were evacuated, and residents and passersby were advised to clean or dispose of clothing they were wearing at the time. Forty-four buildings have been inspected for asbestos contamination. Fifth Avenue was closed for several blocks as Con Edison cleared the exterior of buildings with high-pressure hoses.

Residents complained that the city could offer no timeline as to when they could return home. One resident, speaking of city officials, told the media, "For all their planning, they have no plan."

New York City has the largest steam heating and cooling infrastructure in the world. It came into operation in 1882 and was an engineering marvel in its day. Over 100 miles of pipe continues to supply over 2,000 buildings in Manhattan with heating and air conditioning.

But the aging system's operation is based on the profitability of Con Ed, a massive utility company with nearly \$50 billion in assets. Its CEO, John McAvoy, was paid more than \$8.7 million in 2017.

The company has demonstrated repeatedly that the

needs and safety of the population are secondary considerations as far as it is concerned. As with much of the physical infrastructure in New York, Con Ed operates out-of-date equipment that is a danger to the public and to its workers.

Steam pipes have exploded 12 times since 1987. The asbestos covering of many pipes has been a concern, particularly after a 1989 steam pipe explosion in Gramercy Park, after which Con Ed waited four days before notifying residents of asbestos contamination.

In 2007, an almost identical explosion near Grand Central Station killed one person and injured several others. In a suit 10 years later, plaintiffs alleged that Con Edison had "a long, documented history" of systemic problems with the steam system," according to a report in the *New York Times*. Plaintiffs also repudiated a report by Con Edison made shortly after the incident as a whitewash that cast blame solely on the contractor hired by Con Ed to conduct repairs on the pipe.

A 2012 investigation by the state inspector general's office into an unrelated gas line explosion in Queens uncovered evidence in the 2007 steam pipe explosion of bribery by Con Ed of engineers in the state's Department of Public Service, the investigative arm of the Public Service Commission that regulates the utility, to ensure that a favorable report was forthcoming.

The exact cause of Thursday's explosion remains under investigation.

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