



BUTLER ASSOCIATES, LLC.

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS, PUBLIC RELATIONS

353 LEXINGTON
AVENUE, 17TH FLOOR
NEW YORK, NY 10016
212-685-4600

SHIPPAN LANDING
WORKPOINT
290 HARBOR DRIVE
STAMFORD, CT 06902

WWW.BUTLERPR.COM

SPECTRUM NEWS 1

Plumbers' groups to Council: DOB's lack of gas line oversight is 'time bomb'

BY ARI EPHRAIM FELDMAN NEW YORK CITY

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A 2015 explosion caused by an unpermitted connection to a city gas main killed two people and caused a build to collapse in the East Village (AP Photo/Bebeto Matthews)

City Council members pressed officials from the Department of Buildings on Monday over allegations that the agency has repeatedly allowed uncertified plumbers to work on gas lines across the city.

[A major plumbers union filed a lawsuit against the DOB in December](#) claiming the agency has illegally — and dangerously — granted

hundreds of approvals each week for gas line work by plumbers who do not have the proper certifications.

At a City Council hearing on Monday, a lawyer for the union told the council that the DOB's alleged lax oversight of the work being done on the piping that brings combustible gas into residences, schools and commercial buildings constituted a "public safety time bomb."

Councilmembers, meanwhile, questioned whether the DOB has sufficient inspectors on staff to handle the scale of gas line work done across the five boroughs, which ranges from new building construction to hook-ups for kitchen appliances. They also asked if the department is adhering to laws passed in 2016 that laid out requirements for who can do such work.

"We've heard disturbing allegations that the Department of Buildings is potentially failing in its duties to enforce these laws," said Councilwoman Pierina Sanchez, chair of the body's committee on housing and buildings.

Acting DOB Commissioner Kazimir Valenchik defended the department's record, saying that they make sure to confirm the qualifications of plumbers working on gas lines. He said that despite having a 10% vacancy in its inspection unit — 567 inspectors, out of a budgeted headcount of 630 — its turnaround time for inspections is at just two days.

"It's not such a tremendous shortage," Valenchik said. "I would say we have sufficient people, the way we perform work right now."

The issue of gas line work safety came into sharp relief nearly a decade ago, following a series of explosions caused by faulty connections to the gas mains that run under the city.

In 2016, the council passed a series of gas line safety laws in response to two deadly gas line explosions. [An explosion in Harlem in 2014](#) killed eight people and injured more than 70 others; Con Edison, the gas utility, was [ordered to pay \\$153 million to the state](#) after regulators determined its negligence had played a key role in the incident. In 2015, an illegal tapping of a gas line main led to [an explosion at a building in the East Village](#), killing two and injuring more than 13 others.

Since then, the city has seen at least three other gas explosions, including one [last year in Gravesend, Brooklyn, that destroyed two houses](#).

Yet plumbers' groups told the council the DOB has not enforced Local Law 150 from 2016, which requires the agency to ensure that all gas work in

the city is done either by or under the supervision of a “master plumber” licensed by the department.

“This new gatekeeper requirement only works if it’s enforced, and unfortunately, DOB, the gatekeeper, has not enforced it,” said Patrick Walsh, a lawyer for Plumbers Local 1, the union that brought the December lawsuit.

Arthur Klock, the head of education at the union, noted that the city has [begun taking steps to move away from gas systems](#) in heating and kitchen appliances, which have higher greenhouse gas emissions and come with elevated risks of asthma compared to electric systems.

Klock said he was concerned that, without intervention by the council or city officials, gas line inspection would become less of a priority at the DOB, leaving low-income communities vulnerable to leaks.

“For the next 10, 20, 30 years, people who have less means are still going to be using gas,” he said.

Klock added that he was concerned by the DOB’s recent decision to disband an advisory council of longtime plumbers. The council typically offered assessments of individual plumbers attempting to receive full “master plumber” licensing by the department. Though its conclusions were not binding, the council had an important oversight role, Klock said.

“They zapped it,” he said. “Before it even was gone, they stopped holding meetings.”

Valenchik said that the DOB generally sees plumbers adhering to city laws. Last year, the department issued 17 violations for unpermitted gas line work, he said; the agency has issued none so far this year. Though master plumbers are allowed to self-certify their gas line work, close to 100% of the work passes random inspections by DOB workers, he added.

Representatives for the plumbers’ groups, however, pushed back repeatedly on Valenchik’s testimony, citing instances where they said city inspectors seemed unaware of the actual licensing requirements. Klock said that appliance stores like Home Depot and P.C. Richard routinely allow people without the proper licensing to install ovens on live gas lines without master plumber oversight.

Councilwoman Gale Brewer, head of the body’s committee on investigations, said the hearing was the start of their inquiry into the issue.

“Even though we got some answers that are not appropriate from DOB, we can use your testimony and that of others to ask questions that didn’t get answered today,” Brewer told a panel of representatives for plumbers' organizations.

The union’s lawsuit against the DOB is pending in Manhattan Supreme Court, and the DOB is expected to file its initial responses to the union’s allegations later this week, Walsh said.

<https://www.ny1.com/nyc/all-boroughs/news/2023/02/27/plumbers--groups-to-council--dob-s-lack-of-gas-line-oversight-is--time-bomb->

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