



Office of the Town Manager
Frank Cassidy

Warrenton Town Council

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STAFF REPORT

Council Meeting Date:	March 11 th , 2025
Agenda Title:	Columbia Gas of Virginia Emergency
Requested Action:	Receive the Information / Discussion
Department / Agency Lead:	Office of Emergency Management
Staff Lead:	Johnny Switzer, Emergency Management Coordinator

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On Wednesday, March 5th, at approximately 11:55 AM, Warrenton, Virginia experienced a natural gas emergency triggered by an over odorization incident. Multiple 911 calls, beginning at 12:55 PM, indicated a widespread strong odor of natural gas throughout the town. In response, the Town Emergency Management Coordinator activated the Emergency Operations Plan, fully activating the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) at 1:43 PM. Columbia Gas of Virginia responded to the scene and confirmed the presence of an over-odorization issue, rather than a gas leak. The coordinated response between local emergency services and Columbia Gas mitigated potential risks and ensured public safety. This incident highlights the importance of robust emergency response protocols and effective communication during potential hazardous material events.

BACKGROUND

Incident Background:

On Wednesday, March 5th, 2025, at approximately 11:55 AM, the Town of Warrenton began receiving reports of a strong natural gas odor. The initial 911 call at 12:55 PM was followed by a surge of calls from across the town, indicating a widespread issue.

Key Issues and Response:

- The incident was determined to be caused by an over-odorization of mercaptan in the natural gas system, not a gas leak.
- The volume of 911 calls overwhelmed the public safety system, necessitating mutual aid and area command establishment.
- Columbia Gas of Virginia's response included deploying a mobile command center, emergency operations team, and flaring trailers to mitigate the issue.
- Effective communication was crucial, with press releases, emergency alerts, and joint PIO messaging.
- The coordinated response between the Town of Warrenton, Fauquier County, and Columbia Gas of Virginia was essential in managing the incident and ensuring public safety.

Timeline of Events:

- 11:55 AM: Initial reports of strong gas odor.
- 12:55 PM: First 911 call received.
- 1:15 PM: Town EM J. Switzer called Fauquier County EM for assistance.
- 1:26 PM: Town EM contacted Aaron Boeke, VP of Gas Operations, Columbia Gas of VA.
- 1:43 PM: Town EOC fully activated.
- 1:43 PM: Town EM contacted VDEM, Alexa Boggs, CRC.
- 2:00 PM: Situation status: 39 911 calls, public safety system overwhelmed, mutual aid requested, area command established at Warrenton Volunteer Fire Company (WVFC).
- 2:24 PM: Petrina Jones Wroblewski, Columbia Gas of VA, liaison officer, informed Town EM of the mobile command center and emergency operations team en route.
- 2:45 PM: Derek Powell, Columbia Gas EOC Rep., arrived at EOC.
- 3:45 PM: Town press release issued. WIA and EAS out to public with "If you smell Gas, Evacuate, Dial 911" message.
- 4:00 PM: 76 911 calls received.
- 4:24 PM: Columbia Gas Mobile Command Center arrives.
- 4:25 PM: EOC transitioned to Town/County Full EOC activation.
- 4:34 PM: Town EM hotline updated with emergency alert message.
- 4:36 PM: Joint Town/County PIO message being drafted.
- 4:39 PM: Risk Management reports facility checks complete.
- 5:10 PM: First flaring site established at Fauquier High School.
- 5:28 PM: Main Street reopened.
- 5:45 PM: Columbia Gas suspected excessive mercaptan in the system, activated emergency response plans, and initiated flaring operations.
- 5:52 PM: EOC reduced to essential personnel.
- 6:01 PM: 410 Holiday Court and 674 Hastings Lane are identified as additional flaring sites; flaring begins at Fauquier High.
- 6:03 PM: Second flaring location at 674 Hastings Lane begins.
- 6:10 PM: Columbia Gas update: 176 active priority response tickets, 60 completed, prioritizing hospitals, healthcare, and schools.
- 6:21 PM: EOC reduced to minimum staffing.
- 7:05 PM: Flaring operations begin.
- 7:20 PM: Hotwash discussion with EOC staff.
- 9:22 PM: Final update sent for the night.
- Post 9:22 PM: Over 300 911 calls received. Area command at WVFC demobilized. EOC status moved to yellow / virtual.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

1. **Conduct a Joint After-Action Review (AAR) with Fauquier County Emergency Management for the March 5th Natural Gas odorization Incident.**

Recommendation:

It is recommended that the Town of Warrenton, in collaboration with Fauquier County Emergency Management, conduct a comprehensive After-Action Review (AAR) of the natural gas over odorization incident that occurred on March 5th, 2025. This joint AAR will facilitate a thorough examination of the incident's response, identify areas for improvement, and strengthen interagency coordination for future emergencies.

Rationale:

Comprehensive Analysis: A joint AAR will provide a holistic view of the incident, incorporating perspectives from both the town and county emergency management agencies.

Enhanced Interagency Coordination: Collaborative review will improve communication and coordination protocols between the Town of Warrenton and Fauquier County during future emergencies.

Identification of Best Practices and Areas for Improvement: The AAR will highlight effective response strategies and pinpoint areas where processes can be optimized.

Documentation and Lessons Learned: A formal AAR report will serve as a valuable resource for training, planning, and future emergency response efforts.

Cost Recovery: Costs associated with the AAR are being incorporated into the request for reimbursement from Columbia Gas of Virginia.

Financial Implications:

The costs associated with the AAR will be pursued for reimbursement from Columbia Gas of Virginia.

Conclusion:

Conducting a joint AAR with Fauquier County Emergency Management is crucial for enhancing the Town of Warrenton's emergency preparedness and response capabilities. This collaborative effort will ensure that lessons learned from the March 5th incident are effectively integrated into future emergency management practices.

2. Approval of the VDEM Interagency Agreement between the Town of Warrenton and the Virginia Department of Emergency Management.

Recommendation:

Review and move to the consent agenda the interagency agreement with the Virginia Department of Emergency Management (VDEM).

Rationale:

VDEM Interagency Agreement:

- This agreement is critical to ensure the Town of Warrenton can efficiently request and receive additional resources from VDEM during emergencies or disasters.
- Formalizing this agreement streamlines the process, eliminating potential delays in accessing vital support.
- It is a procedural step that enhances the town's overall emergency preparedness and readiness.

Financial Implications:

The VDEM interagency agreement is a procedural document and does not carry direct costs.

Conclusion:

Approving the VDEM interagency agreement is an essential step to bolster the Town of Warrenton's emergency response capabilities. The interagency agreement will ensure timely access to state resources, which is a best practice in emergency management.

Staff Recommendation: Approval of VDEM Interagency Agreement, Joint After-Action Review (AAR) with Fauquier County Emergency Management, and Request for Full Reimbursement from Columbia Gas of Virginia in alignment with Warrenton Plan 2040

3. Request for Full Reimbursement from Columbia Gas of Virginia in alignment with Warrenton Plan 2040

Recommendation:

- Formally request full reimbursement from Columbia Gas of Virginia to capture all costs and lost revenue incurred by the Town as a result of the natural gas emergency.

Rationale:

Full Reimbursement from Columbia Gas of Virginia:

- **Fiscal Responsibility and Resource Recovery:** The Town incurred significant expenses and lost revenue due to the natural gas emergency, including personnel overtime, equipment usage, facility activation, and potential business disruptions. Seeking full reimbursement ensures fiscal responsibility and protects taxpayer funds.
- **Accountability and Cost Recovery:** Holding Columbia Gas of Virginia accountable for the incident's direct and indirect costs reinforces the principle that responsible parties should bear the financial burden of their actions.
- **Alignment with Warrenton Plan 2040:** Obtaining reimbursement supports the Plan's focus on efficient resource management and financial sustainability by recovering funds expended during the emergency, thus allowing those funds to be used for other town projects and services.

Action Items:

Full Reimbursement:

Compile a comprehensive record of all costs and lost revenue incurred by the Town.

Prepare a formal reimbursement request to Columbia Gas of Virginia, including detailed documentation.

Engage legal counsel as necessary to ensure appropriate representation and negotiation.

Track the reimbursement process and provide regular updates to the Town Council.

Financial Implications:

The reimbursement request aims to recover all direct and indirect costs incurred by the Town due to the natural gas emergency.

Conclusion:

Pursuing full reimbursement from Columbia Gas of Virginia is a critical step to hold the parties responsible.

Service Level/Collaborative Impact

The Town of Warrenton's mission, by prioritizing the health, welfare, and well-being of the community during all emergencies and disasters, inherently links to the core principles of emergency management. This connection is evident in their proactive approach to disaster preparedness, encompassing natural gas emergencies and exemplified by Town Code Chapter 20, establishing the Office of Emergency Management, which aligns with the key emergency management functions of mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery. This comprehensive approach ensures that Warrenton is equipped to handle any crisis, safeguarding its residents and their welfare.

Policy Direction/Warrenton Plan 2040

Ensuring the continuity of Government operations is a key factor of Governance that affects all aspects of Warrenton Plan 2040.

Joint After-Action Review (AAR):

Alignment with Warrenton Plan 2040: This AAR directly supports the Warrenton Plan 2040 goals of enhancing community safety and resilience. By analyzing the incident response and identifying areas for improvement, the Town can strengthen its ability to protect residents and businesses from future emergencies, aligning with the Plan's emphasis on safety and well-being.

The AAR will highlight effective response strategies and pinpoint areas where processes can be optimized, promoting efficient and effective use of resources as envisioned in the Plan.

VDEM Interagency Agreement:

Alignment with Warrenton Plan 2040: This agreement directly supports the Plan's goals of strengthening regional collaboration and ensuring effective emergency response. By formalizing the relationship with VDEM, the Town enhances its ability to access critical resources during emergencies, contributing to the Plan's vision of a safe and prepared community.

Fiscal Impact

The total cost incurred by the Town is currently being calculated and will be reported to the Council once it is verified.

Legal Impact

The natural gas over-odorization incident presents several potential legal implications for the Town of Warrenton. Primarily, the Town has incurred direct and indirect costs, including personnel overtime, equipment usage, facility activation, and potential lost revenue, due to the emergency response. While the Town is hopeful that Columbia Gas of Virginia will agree to full reimbursement, avoiding further legal action, the Town retains the option to pursue legal remedies, including filing a lawsuit for damages, if a satisfactory agreement cannot be reached.

ATTACHMENTS

- A. Warrenton Gas Odor Press Release #1
- B. Warrenton Gas Odor Press Release #2
- C. Warrenton Gas Odor Press Release #3
- D. Warrenton Gas Odor Joint Town and County Press Release #4
- E. Columbia Gas of Virginia media statement
- F. Columbia Gas of Virginia media statement_March 7_9 a.m.
- G. Columbia Gas of Virginia media statement_March 7_1_30 p.m
- H. Columbia Gas of Virginia media statement_March 8_afternoon_v2
- I. Columbia Gas of Virginia media statement_March 9_afternoon update
- J. Gas Leak 911 Calls Map Overlay
- K. 3.5.25 - 1400 Warrenton Situation Status - Columbia Gas Emergency
- L. 3.5.25 - 1500 Warrenton Situation Status - Columbia Gas Emergency
- M. 3.5.25 - 1800 Warrenton Situation Status - Columbia Gas Emergency
- N. 3.5.25 - 2100 Warrenton Situation Status - Columbia Gas Emergency
- O. 3.6.25 - 0900 Warrenton Situation Status - Columbia Gas Emergency
- P. 3.6.25 - 1500 Warrenton Situation Status - Columbia Gas Emergency
- Q. 3.7.25 - 0900 Warrenton Situation Status - Columbia Gas Emergency
- R. 3.7.25 - 1500 Warrenton Situation Status - Columbia Gas Emergency
- S. Feb2025 Mtg--VA Intergovernmental Agreement 2024_edited