

Texas Gas violated safety rules in fatal gas leak, report says

By Benjamin Wermund
AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

The Texas Gas Service violated safety rules in handling a gas leak reported in November at a North Austin house where a gas explosion killed a man in January, according to a report released Friday by the Texas Railroad Commission.

Renald Ferrovécchio, 43, died in the Jan. 9 explosion at 1712 Payne Ave., and a neighbor was seriously injured. The commission report attributed the explosion to a leak that was first reported Nov. 25 — something Texas Gas Service officials have denied in the past.

Texas Gas Service spokeswoman Lori Moreno told the American-Statesman that the service was aware of the report but declined to comment because of the ongoing lawsuit.

The report said Texas Gas Service failed to properly assess and monitor the leak to determine the potential hazard. Texas Gas Service employees who inspected the leak lacked training, experience and knowledge, the report said. Finally, Texas Gas Service failed to collect samples of failed equipment for laboratory testing, the report said.

The report, posted online by KVUE-TV, was delivered to the gas service Friday and said that the commission's legal staff will contact the service about pending enforcement actions. The maximum penalty allowed by statute for pipeline safety rule violations is \$10,000 per day per violation.

Ferrovécchio's parents, Joseph and Emilia Ferrovécchio, of Lakewood, N.J., filed a lawsuit in March on behalf of Renald Ferrovécchio's 9-year-old son, Nolan Ferrovécchio, against the Texas Gas Service; ONEOK Inc., an energy corporation associated with the company; and H&T Utilities, a utility contractor based in Elgin.

The commission's report said that the Texas Gas Service's investigative report showed gas readings were detected in Ferrovécchio's driveway Nov. 25 from a service tap at the house across the street.

The leak was classified by onsite personnel as Grade 2 — a nonhazardous leak at the time of detection that requires a repair be scheduled based on probable future hazard — the report said.



Ricardo B. Brazziell

The explosion at a home that killed owner Renald Ferrovécchio was reported about 8:30 a.m. Jan. 9.



DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC SAFETY
Renald Ferrovécchio died in January when his North Austin home exploded.



Rodolfo Gonzalez
Neighbors say Ferrovécchio had been complaining about a natural gas leak for weeks. His parents are suing several entities.

The leak was later downgraded by personnel who were not at the site during the leak investigation to Grade 3 — a nonhazardous leak that can reasonably be expected to remain nonhazardous.

An attempt to repair the leak was made Dec. 29 by H&T, which excavated the service tap and found a cast-iron pipe leaking under Ferrovécchio's driveway, which would require a permit to cut, the report said.

Repairs were scheduled to be made,

but the leak was not monitored to ensure it remained nonhazardous, said the report by the Railroad Commission, which regulates gas pipelines within the state. The cast-iron pipe that was leaking also was not taken in for laboratory examination, the report said.

Neighbors said Ferrovécchio had been complaining of a natural gas leak for several weeks. The report shows 19

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complaints had been called in to the gas service from residents, including Ferrovicchio, within a two-mile radius of the home. Those calls date back to last July.

The explosion was reported about 8:30 a.m. Jan. 9. Ferrovicchio was found dead in the smoldering wreckage of the home, which he had been remodeling.

A 55-year-old neighbor whose home was damaged by the blast was hospitalized after suffering inhalation burns.

Texas Gas Service officials have said their own investigation shows the explosion was not caused by the November gas leak that the Railroad Commission's report focused on, but by a break in a

main line.

"A small leak reported in November 2011 did not cause this incident," Texas Gas President Kari French told the American-Statesman in February.

The November gas leak came from a small line segment in the driveway, French said in February.

A letter summarizing the gas service's report from that month also attributes the cause of the main break to "shifting soil due to severe drought conditions followed by rainfall." French said at the time that such an incident is "very rare."

No calls or reports were made to Texas Gas Service about the leak, French said at the time.

The break in the main occurred shortly before the incident, the service's report said.

Company officials have said the pipe, installed in 1950, was in good working order and had been surveyed in July 2011.

Ferrovicchio's family is seeking monetary damages to care for his son, Houston attorney Richard Mithoff, who is representing the boy and Ferrovicchio's parents, said in March.

The child lives in The Woodlands near Houston with his mother, Kimberly Murphy, who also is listed as a plaintiff.

Contact Benjamin Wermund at 246-1150