

Residents express fear, frustration after propane blast

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People from the neighbourhood affected by last Sunday's propane explosion in Toronto vented anger and voiced fears at a pair of community meetings Thursday night.

One meeting filled a church hall to overflowing and the other filled a 500-seat banquet hall.

At both meetings, two questions dominated: why a large propane depot was allowed to locate in the neighbourhood and whether the asbestos scattered across people's properties poses a health risk.

The meeting in the banquet hall was organized by local city councillor Maria Augimeri, and there was some good news for homeowners. Sunrise Propane has been ordered to pay for cleaning up all asbestos from the blast.

"Property owners will not have to pay to have that debris from the site of the explosion removed," said city manager Joe Pennachetti.

As more city officials gave their statements, the crowd listened respectfully, but the simmering anger surfaced once Augimeri started speaking.

"Can I get asbestosis from inhaling fibres?" asked one woman.

"What are you gonna do when Sunrise Propane says, 'I'm bankrupt?'" asked another resident.

City officials at the head table frequently answered questions by saying they had no power over the propane depot and that allowing it to open and inspecting it were provincial responsibilities.

But no one from the province or Ontario's propane regulator attended the meeting.

Augimeri said she had invited them. "I am so outraged on behalf of these residents. I can't tell you how much remorse and anger is in me toward the province."

The second meeting was organized by the Ancaster Ratepayers Association, where people packed into the basement of St. Norbert's Church hall to pose questions to health, fire, school and safety officials along with city and provincial politicians.

Local resident Pauline Niles voiced the dominant concern of the meeting, which was asbestos. She wants a registry set up to track long-term health.

"And what else are we exposed to? Will the company do a soil sampling to tell us what other chemicals were in the soil as a result of that explosion?"

People also wanted to talk about the psychological effects on the young and old. One woman asked for the local schools to be "prepared with psychologists and counsellors for when our children return."