

**Subject: Congressional Testimony of Tina Messina
Of the September 13, 2018 Gas Explosion in the Merrimack Valley**

Good Afternoon, My name is Tina Messina and I'd like to thank the committee for this opportunity to discuss the impact of the Sept 13th gas explosion has had on the business community.

After the initial shock of the event the community needed to understand the scope of the problem. Information on the details came slowly as we learned what happened and who was affected by this event.

By the following Sunday, I found myself hitting the trifecta. I was impacted as a landlord, with 2 retail properties; a 3 unit strip mall and a 23 unit shopping center, a business owner of a retail wine store and my home were all in the affected area.

We learned that there could be over 40 miles of gas lines that needed to be replaced and our gas equipment had been compromised. Upon learning this information we didn't know if we were looking at months, several months or years to get back our gas service.

That Monday, I began receiving many phone calls from my tenants. While some tenants could operate without heat, others such as the restaurants were shut down. Our restaurant tenants found themselves with no revenue stream and they were facing loss of help. Chama Grill, a 164 seat restaurant, began to receive cancellations of future events as he could not give these clients any assurance he would have a functional facility.

During that first week after the explosion, finding solutions to our problems was difficult as we needed to wait on state and local officials to give us direction. Information was scarce and frustration set in. As property owners, we began to explore our options to provide alternatives to heat to our buildings. It was September and we figured we had 3 months before the cold weather was upon us and we knew that if we didn't have heat we could not provide a working sprinkler system and we would have to shut the buildings down. It was an unthinkable scenario.

We immediately began to look into alternative fuel sources such as LP tanks but quickly found that we weren't the first to make those calls. It became clear there were many of us, businesses as well as home owners, fighting for the same limited resources. We were also encountering state regulations and large costs for these solutions making it very difficult to determine what to do. We needed answers.

It wasn't till the following Friday that we learned the recovery process was going to take approximately 2 months and businesses were going to be addressed first. While all were relieved to hear the short time line, understanding the execution of the recovery plan was unknown.

During this planning stage many of us were experiencing loss of revenue whether you were able to open your business or not. People stayed away from the area and many didn't know if businesses were open.

As the recovery plan unfolded it became apparent we all needed to individually manage the process of getting our gas turned back on. This became a fulltime job for some of us. Understanding what equipment needed to be fixed vs replaced was not a simple yes or no answer. Managing that process with Columbia was challenging as parameters and information changed daily. You would be told what to do one day and then the next day you would have a new crew telling you something different. It was important to stay on top of the situation to ensure your business and/or your buildings would get "re-lit".

Once the Gas-Ready plan was deployed we were hit with another wave of disruption. While we all understood replacing 48 miles of gas lines was a monumental task, we did not understand the impact it would have on the infrastructure surrounding our businesses. Roads were shut down and dug up while traffic was redirected making it time consuming and difficult for people to get to our businesses. For more than 5 days, the only way to get in and out of our 23 unit shopping center was through the CVS drive thru.

As it became very difficult to get to the affected areas, many people were being told not to go to these areas via social media. People were posting "what a mess" took me 40 minutes to go a ½ mile, don't go there if you don't have to." Frustration amongst patrons began to set in...and they stayed away. I experienced this with the Wine ConneXtion, as our year over year sales were down from the previous time last year and I expect other businesses experienced the same.

Also during this time it became evident that many people were living out of the area. Whether by choice or the need to relocate due to their living conditions, our regular customers were not around to shop for our goods and services. As someone whose personal home was affected, I understood the difficulties of living without heat, hot water and cooking capabilities.

Now that we are entering our 3rd month into the recovery, concerns turn to the holiday season. This is a critical time for retailers and hospitality businesses, and we wonder how will we fare through this season? Do customers know we're open? Will they return to our businesses or

have they adopted new locations of shopping for goods and services? When will residents be able to return to their homes and patronize our businesses?

In a booming economy, these are very unsettling questions we are about to face. In conclusion I'd like to let the committee know that the people of the Merrimack Valley are resilient and while we are still dealing with the challenges to recover from this disaster, we look forward to the days where we can get back to normal.

Thank you.