

DAILY LOCAL NEWS

Citizens Are Heroes **in Fight for Pipeline Safety**

January 28, 2019, Page A7

Back in August of 2016, the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection, at my insistence, held a public hearing on Sunoco's Mariner East pipeline project at West Chester University.

At the time, a handful of citizens and I raised our concerns about this project and its impact on our environment, property values, quality of life, and health and safety.

Some said I was being too aggressive – that my comments were too strong and too heated. A few even said I was wrong to sound the alarm so loudly, so early on.

As it turns out, unfortunately, we weren't wrong. But oh, how I wish we were. Today, the sky isn't falling, but in parts of Chester County, the ground sure is.

With Mariner East, we're experiencing the same problems and potential safety emergencies again and again and again. This week, it was a sinkhole exposing Mariner East 1 off Lisa Drive in West Whiteland. If that sounds familiar, it's because the same thing happened last winter.

And so, for the umpteenth time, I worked to navigate the patchwork of state and federal bureaucracies entrusted with pipeline safety only to again be left even more troubled and infuriated than before.

Here's why: on two occasions in the past year, the PUC has forced Sunoco to shut down ME1 due to safety concerns only to allow it to resume operation shortly thereafter without a clear and thoroughly vetted explanation why.

Same pipeline. Same place. Same problem. Obviously, the PUC's on-again, off-again approach to pipeline safety isn't working.

And that's not all. Although Sunoco now has again been forced to suspend operation on ME1 due to the current situation, its other pipelines nearby are still up and running. The 12-inch line, another antiquated repurposed petroleum pipeline like ME1, is still moving hazardous, highly volatile natural gas liquids far too close latest sinkhole.

In fact, because of the way Sunoco cobbled together segments of pipeline to salvage the controversial Mariner East 2 (ME2) project, no PUC approvals were required to put it into service. That's right: there was no regulation or government inspection whatsoever of a more than 80-year-old pipeline that has a history of leaks, including 33,516 gallons of gasoline as recently as mid-June and a 2015 leak in Edgemont Township.

There are so many problems with the PUC's backward approach to pipeline safety and oversight that it alone could be the subject of another column. But one of the clearest examples came in December when its own Bureau of Investigation and Enforcement tried to explain its position on the 12-inch line – saying that it never made any assertion that the pipeline is “safe,” but that's not to say it's “unsafe.”

Whatever that means it sure doesn't make you feel, well, safe.

Sunoco has one of the worst safety track records in the pipeline industry and has demonstrated that it certainly can't be trusted to do right by our residents and communities. The PUC, which operates with little to no transparency, lost our confidence a long time ago. Keep in mind, when the PUC investigates pipeline mishaps and accidents, those reports are never made public until the investigations are completed, which can take a year or more. So, we still don't know the full story of what happened on Lisa Drive last March or earlier this week, just like we still don't entirely know their findings regarding the pipeline explosion in Beaver County in September.

It's like the Public Utility Commission is all “utility” and no “public.”

Fortunately, the public has done an incredible job of stepping up, getting involved, and working to ensure that its voice is heard. From day one, the citizens themselves have been the heroes of this process, from speaking out at

the preliminary hearings and meetings several years ago to raising funds for their own pipeline risk assessment to filing formal legal complaints and petitions to the PUC. In fact, both times sinkholes exposed ME1 on Lisa Drive, residents – not Sunoco nor the county – were the first to notify the PUC.

Chester County is blessed with some of the best and brightest minds in law, engineering, statistics, chemistry, environmental science, hydrology, geology, advocacy and so on. My constituents are not only seasoned professionals in their fields, they're also moms, dads, and grandparents who are rightfully concerned about the safety of their children, families, and communities.

As a result, opposition to Mariner East has gone from a political micro-issue to strong and growing bipartisan, grassroots movement. Sunoco vastly underestimated the citizens Chester County and their resilience. And we're not about to stop now.

State Senator Andy Dinniman, of West Whiteland, represents the 19th Senatorial District and serves on the Senate Environmental Resources and Energy Committee.