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COMMUNITY: Ratepayers' meeting on explosion packed to overflowing

'This is a disaster. Will there be disaster relief?'

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CLARK KIM

Hundreds of local residents packed into the basement of St. Norbert Church where the Ancaster Ratepayers Association held its community meeting Thursday night to get answers about the propane explosion that devastated their neighbourhood.

Another hundred or so were asked to listen through speakers upstairs and outside the church as the growing crowd quickly exceeded the building's capacity.

An estimated 400 people attended the meeting -- one of two held in the community at the same time -- to voice their concerns to government representatives as well as health and safety officials.

The panel consisted of local MPP Monte Kwinter (York Centre), city councillors Rob Ford (Ward 2, Etobicoke North) and Mike Del Grande Ward 39, Scarborough-Agincourt), Ontario Progressive Conservative party leader John Tory, deputy city manager Richard Butts, and Toronto Public Health doctor Howard Shapiro.

Many of the questions and frustrations were directed to Shapiro over asbestos concerns despite his reassurance that the health risk from the explosion is "very low."

"The short answer is that although there is asbestos in the neighbourhood, it's a relatively small amount," said Shapiro, noting that results of a test, monitoring asbestos levels around the workers currently cleaning up the debris, indicate very low levels.

Others like Pauline Niles wanted to know if any of the three levels of government would commit to provide funding for residents who have lost so much in the wake of the explosion rather than solely depend on insurance.

"This is a disaster. Will there be disaster relief?" Niles addressed the panel. "None of us in this room made the decision to put the propane tank there. So why should we bear the cost?"

JP Pampena, who is blind and has a special needs child, said more needs to be done to help people with disabilities including the elderly.

"What kind of provisions are there for disabled people?" said Pampena. "Who do we go to?"

Councillor Ford, whose ward is in Etobicoke but came at the invitation of ratepayers association president Tony Di Santo, said he would move a motion at council to set up a disaster relief fund, which currently doesn't exist at the municipal level.

He added that to avoid another company such as Sunrise Propane to operate in their neighbourhood, the zoning bylaw must be changed from industrial to residential.

“You could do that relatively quick,” said Ford, who provided a list of phone numbers for all the city managers to contact for assistance.

Some residents, however, expressed outrage that it wasn’t done sooner and wondered why on several occasions the propane facility on Murray Road was cited for safety violations in the past two years yet it continued to operate.

Kwinter said that Ontario Consumer Services Minister Harinder Takhar has called for an updated and accurate list of all the propane storage facilities from the Technical Standards and Safety Authority (TSSA), an arms-length agency responsible for monitoring and inspecting propane operators in the province.

The TSSA has a Monday deadline to compile the list as well as have an inspection action plan for every propane facility, starting with the largest ones and those in urban centres, by Tuesday, Kwinter said.

But Brian Patterson, president of the Ontario Safety League, an organization advocating for public safety, said the TSSA should not be doing their own inspections.

“The TSSA ought not to go and fix this problem, which is of their making,” said Patterson, noting more qualified inspectors such as fire prevention specialists should be involved. “The work they (the TSSA) have done in the past is shoddy, inadequate and incomplete.”

The TSSA issued a statement the day of the meeting, declining an invitation to the ratepayers meeting because of a civil lawsuit launched by residents brought upon the organization.

Also notably absent was local city councillor Maria Augimeri (York Centre) who held her own meeting at the same time just a few kilometres away from the church. Augimeri had a very public spat with Di Santo about the dueling meetings earlier this week.

“I’m disappointed she didn’t come over. It’s not good for the community,” said Di Santo. “We still have a lot of work to do and I’m willing to work with her as long as she’s willing to work with the community. With things like this, you put everything else aside.”