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NORTH YORK: Residents find few answers at post-explosion meeting

Councillor faces angry audience

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CYNTHIA REASON

Maria Augimeri faced a fury of frustration-fuelled finger pointing last night from residents still suffering the aftermath of Sunday's massive explosion at a propane facility in Downsview.

Forced to endure a barrage of boos from the 500-plus crowd gathered at the meeting nearly every time she attempted to speak, the Ward 9 (York Centre) councillor shut down criticism over her absence immediately following the blast at Sunrise Propane, attempting instead to assure residents that the "hand of God" was at play in ensuring entire families hadn't been "wiped out."

"God's hands were there, but where were yours?" yelled one man, whose comment spurred jeers from other audience members.

Augimeri explained she was just three days into a family vacation in Italy at the time of the blast, and took the first flight home to be with her constituents.

"We are a community of very strong families, and I know that together we will get through this," she said.

But residents weren't convinced, with many questioning how such an explosive plant could be located in a residential area to begin with.

"You keep saying nobody wanted this to happen, but why was it there in the first place?" asked Jack Giannone. "Residents brought it to your attention, but three years later it was still there. Why?"

In a fall-back response repeatedly pulled out – and consequently jeered at – throughout the meeting, acting city manager Joe Pennachetti replied that the city's role in the matter was limited; that he couldn't speak on behalf of the Technical Standards and Safety Authority (TSSA), the provincial body that regulates and licences such facilities.

When asked why no one from the TSSA or the province was in attendance, Augimeri said simply: "They were invited."

In a statement released Thursday night, however, the TSSA said the only meeting they received an invitation to was a rival one sponsored by the Ancaster Ratepayers Association. They declined to attend that meeting after being named as a defendant in a civil lawsuit launched by residents impacted by the explosion, the statement said.

With the TSSA absent and no one else seemingly able to answer for the past presence of the plant, Pennachetti was able to account for its future: "Sunrise will not be allowed to reopen on that site," he said, to an excited flurry of applause from the audience.

But it was a short-lived celebration, as most residents expressed fear and doubt in public health assurances that their exposure to explosion-spread asbestos was minimal and that the likelihood of

anyone contracting an asbestos-related ailment is “highly unlikely.”

“You downplay the asbestos issue, but many of us sleep with our windows open, and anyone at the blast site that morning could tell you it looked like Baghdad,” said one resident. “Sometimes that kind of dust takes a year to settle, but you’re telling us it’s all okay as long as we wipe our feet?”

Pennachetti reiterated that Sunrise is under order of the Ministry of Environment to clean up asbestos released in the blast, and that clean-up crews are moving as quickly as they can.

While almost every resident who took to the microphone took the opportunity to thank and praise frontline workers for their sacrifice that fiery morning, Toronto Fire Chief Bill Stewart said their work is not yet done.

“Our goal is to work with all the various agencies involved to restore your community to its pre-explosion state, to its normal state, to the state you all enjoyed before all this,” he said.

That sentiment was echoed by 32 Division’s Insp. John Wallace: “With the exception of just eight houses, all of you have been re-established in your homes, but we’ve established a command post and we intend to stay with you until the last house is re-occupied.”