

337 propane sites dot GTA

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AARON VINCENT ELKAIM/TORONTO STAR

Angela Palumbo, centre, with her aunt and uncle John and Maria Palumbo, left, and their daughter-in-law Anna Palumbo, shows her frustration at still being barred from her Spalding Rd. home Aug. 12, 2008.

Map note

Ontario's Technical Standards and Safety Authority released a list of propane facilities in the GTA Wednesday, which the Star's local checks found to be inaccurate. We are currently reviewing the information to update our map and will bring it back as soon as possible. We apologize for the inconvenience.

Tally shows how tough it will be to buffer city's residential areas

Choosing sites for flammables 'a judgment call'

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Urban Affairs Reporter

A total of 337 sites across the GTA house propane filling tanks – from large plants like the one that blew up Sunday to smaller ones for refilling cylinders for the backyard barbecue – meaning there's probably one in a neighbourhood near you.

So, in the aftermath of the fatal explosion at Sunrise Propane, a call like Mayor David Miller's to keep large propane facilities at least 1.6 kilometres from residential areas is easier said than done.

And even if we could do it, such a move might not make us safer.

With so much consumer demand for propane, locating storage and handling farther afield raises the spectre of more transport by truck and rail, which also carry risks.

In 1997, thousands of people, many of them seniors, were evacuated from their Scarborough homes after a Sunrise tanker jackknifed on Highway 401 at 2 a.m.

"The 401 is already way over capacity, and you would increase the danger of having a fireball or a catastrophic collision on the highways," said professor Ken McBey, of York University's disaster and emergency management program.

"There's no real easy solution."

The Technical Standards and Safety Authority, which implements Ontario law on the safe handling of propane, yesterday underscored that point by giving a tally on the amount of the fuel in our midst.

Across the 416 and 905 areas, there are 337 sites with propane filling tanks of varying sizes; across the province, there are 1,708. These include large plants such as Sunrise, stations for vehicles, key/card lock outlets often used by trucks, and spots where homeowners can refill an RV or backyard barbecue cylinder.

Provincial regulations require that such above-ground propane filling tanks be at least 300 feet (91 metres) from a school and a minimum 25 feet (8 metres) from a residence.

These locations do not include cylinder exchange sites such as those operated by Home Depot, Canadian Tire and other retailers, where people drop off empty canisters and leave with a full one.

Since Sunday, many have said the provincial rules and municipal zoning don't offer enough protection. But safety experts and industry watchers, rather than rush through politically expedient rule changes, want a more measured approach.

"You can't shoot off the hip," said Emile Therien, past president of the Canada Safety Council and a member of Transport Canada's advisory council on the transportation of dangerous goods. He notes there are some 25,000 so-called dangerous goods in Canada.

"If we're talking about banning hazardous goods in cities, you'll end up banning service stations," Therien said. "Where do you start and where do you stop?"

"It's really about co-existing."

Both Therien and McBey said Sunday's explosion serves as a wake-up call. But they said investigators should be allowed to determine exactly what happened before all parties – government, industry and the public – discuss what to do next.

"It's easy to point fingers," McBey said. "But these things have to go somewhere and there's going to be risk associated with that."

At Queen's Park, Small Business and Consumer Services Minister Harinder Takhar is today expected to release a list of the addresses of all 337 sites across the GTA.

Officials in Takhar's department have spent the past several days compiling a list in the wake of Sunday's explosion and are to make it public this morning.

Sunday's explosions have prompted widespread calls – including Miller's – to keep large propane tank facilities such as Sunrise at least 1.6 kilometres from residential areas, which was the post-blast evacuation area.

Miller has asked city officials to look at how to make that happen. Public Safety Minister Rick Bartolucci has also said his department will work with the city, industry and regulators to do what it can to boost safety and try to ensure an incident like the Sunrise explosion, which killed two people including a firefighter, doesn't happen again.

Following the blast, the propane industry, noting it's already heavily regulated and has a very good safety record, pledged to work with authorities to implement any new rules developed.

But it also said investigators should be allowed to come to some conclusions about the cause of the Sunrise fire before determining preventive measures.

Queen's University mechanical and material engineering professor Gabriel Ciccarelli said that while incidents like that are "pretty spectacular," the chances of a recurrence are relatively low.

A more scientific approach than simply assessing the probability of such an event, he said, is to be as prepared as possible to handle its impact – including ensuring that people are far enough for safety from potential blast waves, heat and radiation, as well as protected from missile-like debris.

"There's a lot of things on either side of the equation that have to be weighed" to determine locations, said Ciccarelli, a professor of mechanical and material engineering. "But in the end, it's a judgment call with science behind it."

For Councillor Giorgio Mammoliti, (Ward 7 York West), who represents the ward adjoining that where the explosion occurred, the incident points up the need for better public information on what's being stored or used in every part of the city that's zoned industrial.

He's proposing that city inspectors from the licensing and standards division as well as the building division be tasked with going out to sites and asking questions – not just about propane, but all kinds of flammables.

"I want the whole city looked at," Mammoliti said. "If there's anything that resembles a catastrophe potentially happening, the local councillors at the very least should know about it so we can decide what we should do about it."

In any industrial pocket, he said, "We should know what's being stored there, whether or not it's legal, we should know if the province has given out permits. We should know all this stuff. What I think all of us have learned from all of this is we don't know. And if we don't know, our communities don't know."

If there's a willingness in the bureaucracy to get a better handle on this information, it's doable, he said.

"When we ask for this I do not want to hear excuses."

With files from Donovan Vincent and Robert Benzie