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Blast must spark real action

Going forward, what are the best ways to ensure there is no repeat of a huge propane depot explosion beside a residential community, as happened at Sunrise Propane early last Sunday in the Keele St.-Wilson Ave. area?

First, the same government regulator which decides whether such a plant is safe must also be responsible for deciding where it goes.

At present, City Hall determines potential locations -- through outdated and inconsistent zoning bylaws -- while a provincial "arm's-length" agency, the Technical Standards and Safety Authority (TSSA), determines whether the facility is being safely operated.

But since where propane is stored is obviously relevant to whether it's safe to the surrounding community, one agency, not two, must make this call from now on and be held accountable for it, either at City Hall or Queen's Park.

A repeat of last week's blame game, with the city claiming it was powerless to stop the facility and the TSSA arguing it had no choice about where it should go, is simply unacceptable.

Next, the city must harmonize its raft of inconsistent zoning bylaws inherited from Toronto's six municipalities prior to amalgamation in 1998, which limit its planning authority over industrial zones.

Mayor David Miller and Co. must stop whining about the amalgamation of Toronto 10 years ago, and just get on with it.

As for the TSSA, Premier Dalton McGuinty, who objected to its creation by former premier Mike Harris when McGuinty was opposition leader in 1996, must also get his act in gear.

Since the explosion, it's been obvious the TSSA is in over its head, providing conflicting information based on unclear and/or out-of-date records.

It's also clear it has too broad a mandate -- everything from inspecting fuel depots to elevators, amusement rides, ski lifts, boilers and pressure vessels, certifying operating engineers and their facilities, plus inspecting the stuffing in mattresses and other "upholstered and stuffed articles".

The NDP and other critics argue the TSSA, as a private, non-profit agency contracted by government to carry out these inspections, is too close to the industries it regulates. They maintain problems can be corrected if the government takes the TSSA over and makes it a public agency again.

Perhaps, but let's remember the other major player that fell down in this fiasco was City Hall, so privately run or publicly run clearly isn't as important as competently run.

Finally, where is Prime Minister Stephen Harper and the federal government in all this?

Surely they're not going to suggest the problems last week's explosions ripped open are confined to Toronto, the GTA or Ontario?

Surely the encroachment of residential neighbourhoods into lands abutting industrial parks that years ago were reasonably isolated from cities isn't just a Toronto or Ontario problem, but a national one.

So how do the feds plan to address it -- before the next explosion rather than after?