

Gas geyser disrupts Island

30 homes emptied; road shut

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A 60-foot geyser of high-octane gasoline erupted yesterday morning in Willowbrook after a backhoe accidentally struck a valve on a pipeline, forcing the evacuation of 30 homes and bringing scores of firefighters, police and emergency cleanup crews.

Fire officials estimated that up to 35,000 gallons of fuel spilled, much of it entering storm sewers and winding up in a creek in Travis a little more than a mile away. Despite the risk of explosion, no serious injuries were reported during the mishap.

Workers were still mopping up the spill today, and police closed off a three-quarter-mile section of Victory Boulevard, from Wyona Avenue to Richmond Avenue in Bulls Head. The road was not expected to be reopened before noon today, according to police Capt. Joseph Lehan.

The 30-mile-long pipeline, owned by Buckeye Pipe Line Co., of Linden, N.J., runs from Carteret, N.J., to LaGuardia and Kennedy airports in Queens, supplying fuel for small airplanes, according to a Port Authority official who asked that his name not be used.

The line, which runs alongside a second pipe carrying jet fuel, parallels the Staten Island Expressway for much of its course through Staten Island. The jet fuel line did not rupture.

The 9:15 a.m. mishap occurred on South Gannon Avenue, a service road of the expressway, near the highway's Victory Boulevard exit, while workmen tried to repair a faulty valve on the pipeline. The leak, caused by a one-inch gash in the line, was plugged three hours later.

Police officers on the scene prevented pedestrians from crossing into the cordoned off area for fear that a careless match or cigarette could ignite the fumes. As an added precaution, Brooklyn Union Gas workers shut off the supply of methane gas to 29 homes on the perimeter of the accident site. At the re-

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quest of Fire Department officials. Con Edison cut off power to street lights in the area.

Sample vapor levels taken near sewer openings along the blocked off section of Victory Boulevard were still at "near explosive levels" at 10:30 p.m., Lehan said.

The fuel flowed down Victory Boulevard into soil surrounding Willowbrook Park and also through storm sewer lines before it emptied into a creek at the William T. Davis Wildlife Preserve in Travis.

Firefighters at the preserve used foam and a vacuum to control the fuel runoff.

Firefighters washed down 50 condominiums under construction opposite the geyser as a preventive measure before the spraying leak was finally pinpointed and plugged at 12:15 p.m.

By 1:30 p.m., the incident was declared "under control" by the Fire Department.

"The incident was not reported immediately because the three-man crew from the pipeline company wanted to be sure they could get the leak under control first," said one firefighter on the scene. "But the situation continued to worsen."

Fire Commissioner Joseph Spinnato said the entire pipeline was shut down shortly after 9:30 a.m., as well as valves a mile apart on each side of the affected area of the line, in an effort to contain the leak.

He said as many as 35,000 gallons of the fuel may have leaked into the storm sewers near the pipeline, but that nearby sanitary sewers and water lines were not affected.

Deputy Fire Commissioner John Mulligan said the geyser continued to spew between 40 and 50 gallons of fuel per minute into the air and onto the roadway while firefighters used two hoses to spray about 7,000 gallons of a fish protein-based foam mixed with water to neutralize the gas.

Officer Michael Zarrilli of Sta-

ten Island Highway Patrol first noticed the plight of the workers and the shooting stream of high octane gasoline shortly after 9 a.m. when he stopped a city bus for a traffic violation near the expressway's Victory Boulevard exit.

"The bus was in the left lane when I pulled it and the driver over. I made him drive down under the overpass on Victory Boulevard — that's when I saw the gasoline shooting out from the pipeline and into the air on South Gannon," he recalled. "I immediately radioed 911."

Joseph Colangelo of New Springville, a passerby, said he saw the pipeline workers "soaking wet" and "running around" in all directions.

"They were wet, dirty and their clothing was just soaked. This happened around 7:30 a.m. At first I thought a water main was broken. Next I smelled gas, but I attributed it to a gas leak coming from my car. I was on my way to work, but then something told me to stick around," he said. "Then suddenly all I saw was ambulances, police and fire trucks."

Mulligan said 200 firefighters from 35 Fire Department units, 100 policemen and six Emergency Medical Service ambulances were on the scene before the leak was finally plugged.

At 9:30 a.m. yesterday, 65 children between the ages of 3 and 5 at the Alphabetland Pre-School Center at 2734 Victory Blvd. were evacuated because of "choking fumes" outside the building, police said.

Within 15 minutes after the school was evacuated, residents of 30 homes on Darcey Avenue — some multi-family dwellings located in back of the condominiums under construction — were also told to leave as a safety measure by police and firefighters. Some stayed with friends and relatives, police said.

Gladys Schweiger, a Red Cross spokeswoman, said plans had been made with Sea View Hospi-

tal and Home to provide 500 beds and a similar number at a nearby elementary school "should the need have arisen" to evacuate the Staten Island Developmental Center.

Fire officials said "high levels" of gasoline vapors had been detected in concrete vaults holding underground wires at the Staten Island Developmental Center, making the contemplation of such an action "necessary" until about 4 p.m., when the storm sewers were flushed of gasoline residue and the vaults rechecked by Con Edison.

City environmental officials said chemical tests conducted by their agency indicated the gasoline had been confined to the storm sewers while "high readings" of gasoline vapor had been found in concrete vaults containing underground electrical wires beneath the developmental center and on Victory Boulevard, which runs parallel to South Gannon Avenue.

A container truck obtained by the DEP was used to pump out residual gas in the pipeline after the dual line was shut down, Mulligan said.

Throughout the night, workers pumped water into storm sewers near the damaged pipe and used equipment to suck up the water and fuel mixture. A parade of tanker trucks, under contract to Buckeye, carried 5,500-gallon loads of water and gasoline to a hazardous waste disposal facility, said Mira Ledman, an assistant commissioner of the DEP.

Ledman would not reveal the identity or the location of the disposal facility last night.

She was one of the officials working from an inter-agency "field headquarters" vehicle, parked at Canterbury Avenue and Victory Boulevard, along with crews from the police, fire, sanitation and transportation departments and the Coast Guard.

Ledman said a DEP crew will be on the scene this morning to remove mounds of soil and debris

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contaminated by the leaked fuel. Areas of ground near Alphabetland preschool and along Victory Boulevard would be excavated to remove contaminated soil, according to officials.

"The extent of the digging will be determined tomorrow as they go along," a DEP official, who asked not to be identified, said last night.

As thousands of gallons of water was used in the cleanup operation, some residents reported that their tap water was becoming rust-colored. DEP spokesman Sam Friedman said his agency had dispatched an inspector to investigate the complaints, and he speculated that the heavy water use might be the cause of the discoloration.

Mayor Edward I. Koch, who was at the scene yesterday along with Borough President Ralph Lamberti, had high praise for the Fire Department and the police.

"They prevented a situation which they had in Mexico City last December when large amounts of gasoline exploded and claimed many lives," Koch said. "It is serious because any time you have a potential catastrophe it's got to be deemed serious. When you consider what might have happened, all you have to do is look at Mexico City."

"You have to praise the Fire Department and police for their response to the situation," Lamberti added. "Their combined preparedness and responsiveness in this situation prevented a terrible tragedy from happening."

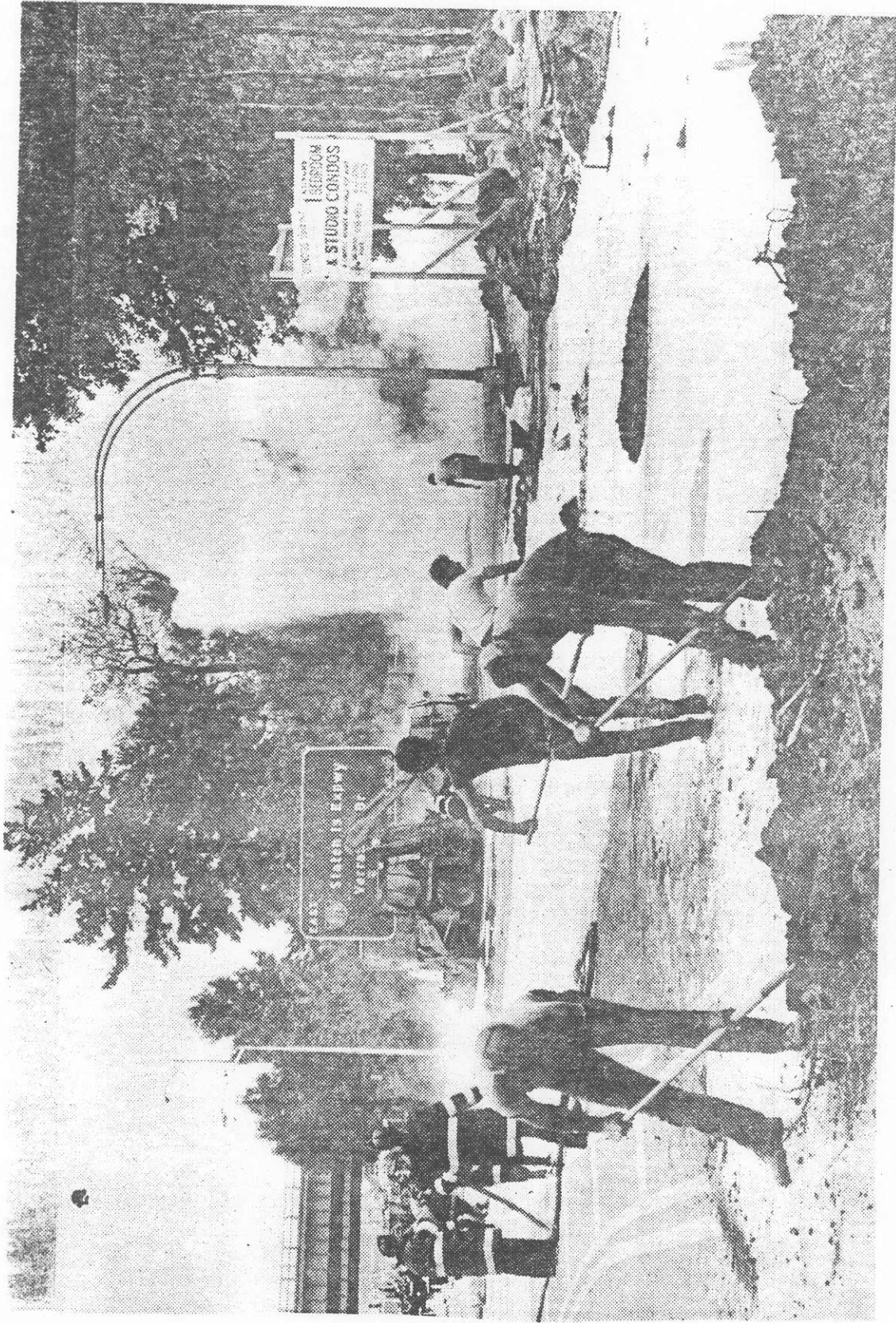
Koch said he "would make sure" the "company involved" would pay "at least half" the cost of the oil spill's cleanup.

A Fire Department spokesman said pipeline company representatives and fire officials are scheduled to meet at the department's Fire Prevention Office in Brooklyn to discuss "how and why this happened," as well as preventive measures for the accident's reoccurrence.

Meanwhile, Community Board 2's public services committee, during a regular meeting last night, passed a resolution calling for legal action to close the pipeline if a full investigation of the rupture is not forthcoming.

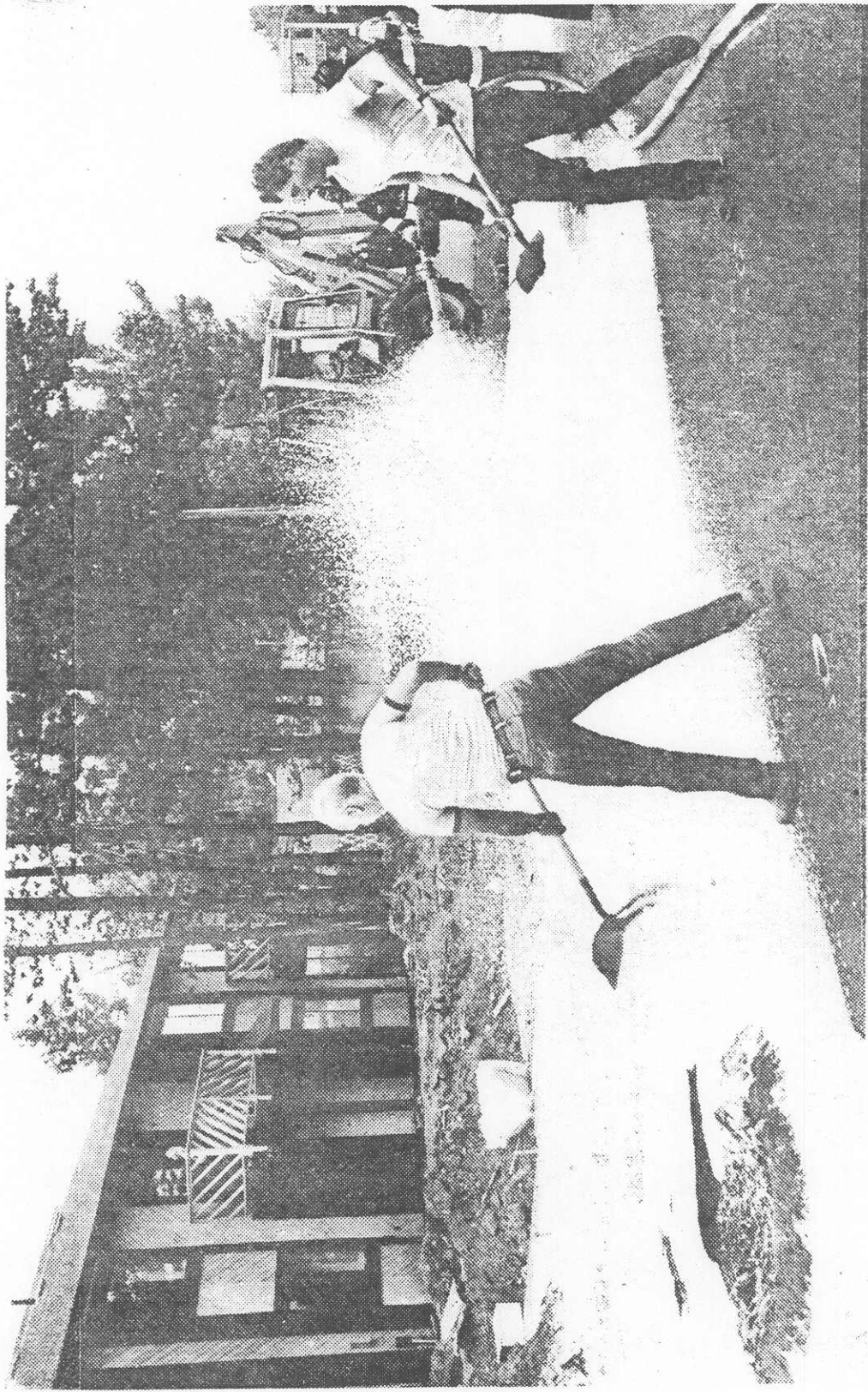
Committee members said the leak recalled the death of Rossville workers in a natural gas explosion in 1973. "I think a full explanation should be given on how this happened," board member Philip Scampas said.

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S.I. Advance Photo by Frank J. Johns

Workers use soil to dam the fuel runoff as geyser erupts.



S.I. Advance Photo by Tony Carannante
Buckeye employees and firefighters use foam and dirt to contain flow from the leak.