

Fire Department orders fuel line tested

By JIM HUGHES
Advance Staff Writer

The Fire Department yesterday ordered the owner of a ruptured pipeline that spewed 35,000 gallons of gasoline in Willowbrook Monday to conduct a pressure test of the line before fuel is again pumped through it, a department official said.

Deputy Fire Commissioner John Mulligan said fire officials met for several hours in Brooklyn with representatives of the owner, Buckeye Pipe Line Co., and also instructed them to submit a preliminary report on their version of the incident within "the next few days." A separate Fire Department probe is already under way.

Meanwhile, weary, rain-soaked work crews finished a massive cleanup of the mess that erupted after a backhoe knocked off a valve on the pipeline, which carries high-octane gasoline from Linden, N.J., to LaGuardia and Kennedy International Airports in Queens.

Samuel Friedman, a spokesman for the city Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), said the clean-up was considered "a huge success" because workers were able to recover most of the gas that surfaced in Willowbrook — where it forced the evacuation of 40 residents — and in Travis.

The accident Monday morning sent a 60-foot geyser of gas into the air and forced more than 200 firefighters and other officials to scramble about for hours, coating the explosive gas with a flame-retardant foam and cordoning off a two-mile long stretch of Victory Boulevard in Willowbrook.

Mulligan said Buckeye is "on notice" that the incident is still under investigation. However, he

said the company has not been accused of any negligence, Mulligan said.

Buckeye is already paying for the entire cleanup effort, although a company spokesman, Jim Kelly, said yesterday he could not estimate how much the cleanup would cost. He said the company planned on paying the Fire Department for the foam, and would also conduct soil tests on the ground near the spill.

The backhoe that caused the accident was being operated by a contracting firm hired by Buckeye to excavate the pipeline to allow repairs.

During a telephone interview from Buckeye headquarters in Linden, N.J., Kelly identified the contractor as UUP (United Utility Pipeline), a Bloomfield-based firm. He said UUP has done work for Buckeye for many years.

UUP officials could not be reached for comment yesterday.

Ted Nabavi, a DEP hazardous material specialist, said Buckeye workers had replaced a broken pipe valve on the pipeline by about 11 a.m. yesterday.

While fire and Buckeye offi-

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als met, workers at the Victory Boulevard site near the Staten Island Expressway overpass continued to clean up, having worked through the night to capture the last bit of errant gas. Many of the raincoat-clad firemen and DEP workers rolled their eyes when asked if it had been a long night.

Edward McGlynn, a chief with the 22nd Battalion, was still marveling at the potential catastrophe that was averted.

"Gasoline is more flammable than fuel oil, more dangerous," he said. "It would have created a fireball if it ignited."

As McGlynn spoke, DEP and Buckeye officials used vacuum pumps to suck up the gritty mix of sand, water, gas and foam still floating over a quarter-mile stretch of Victory Boulevard near South Gannon Avenue.

Nabavi said most of the gas on Victory Boulevard had been recovered through the vacuum pumps.

Similarly, he said, vacuum pumps on Signs Road in Travis had apparently sucked out most of the gas that had poured into a creek in the Davis Wildlife Preserve. The gas reached the creek at about 1 p.m. Monday after traversing through a series of storm sewers near the Victory Boulevard leak.

Friedman, the DEP spokesman, said officials were especially pleased about the cleanup effort at the swampy wildlife preserve. The gas there had started pouring into the stream in heavy doses and workers had to set up absorbent pads across the creek to soak up the gas as the vacuum pumps were put in place.

Friedman said there appeared to be little damage to wildlife in the area. He said most of the gas was recovered by the vacuums before it spread more than a few

hundred feet into the creek. The small amount of gas that was not recovered apparently vaporized into the air, Friedman said.

DEP officials said the vaporized gas did not pose a health threat to residents, although one Island resident who did not want to be identified told the Advance yesterday that his mother suffered nausea, cramps and vomiting because of the gas-related odors.

Nabavi, however, said, "All the gas was recovered, there were no complaints, no health problems."

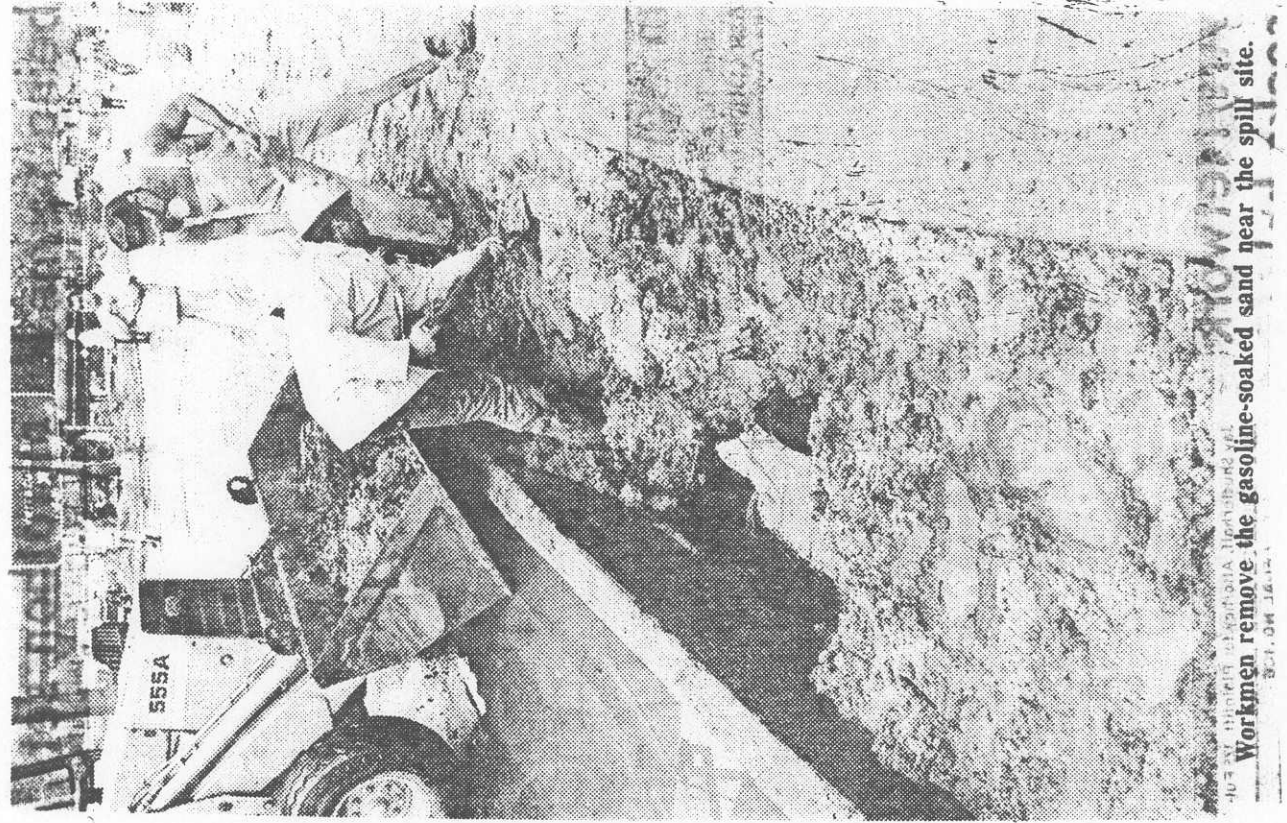
He said some gas did enter the sanitary sewer lines that handle the sewage from homes, but he said the lines were continually flushed and ventilated through the night so that no residents were in danger.

"We had no complaints of odors in homes, sewer traps or basements," he said.

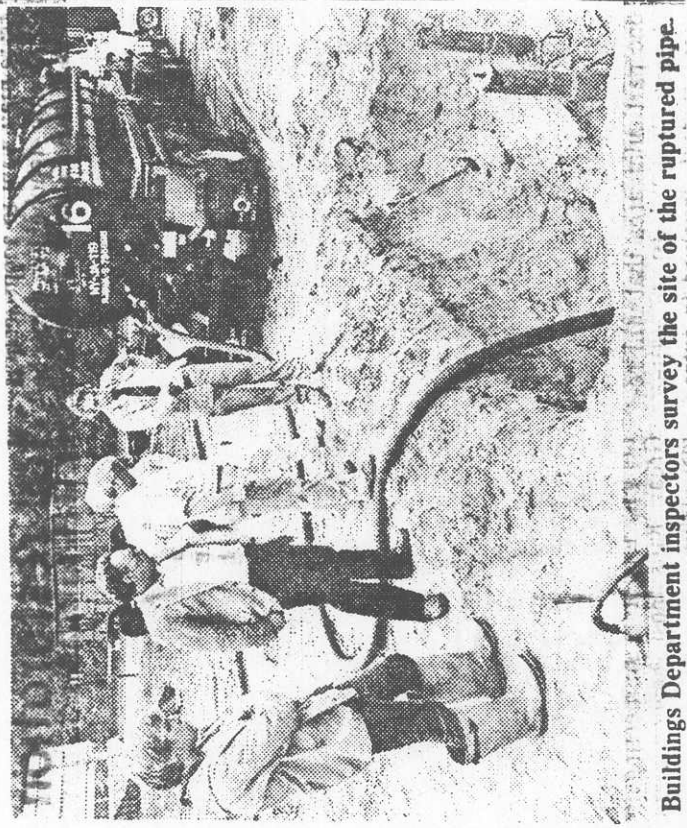
The 40 residents who were forced to evacuate their Darcey Avenue homes in Willowbrook because of their proximity to the gas spill were able to return to their homes Monday night. However, fire officials ordered the Alphabetland Pre-School Center on Victory Boulevard to remain closed yesterday as a precaution.

The 50 children who attend school there — several hundred feet from the leak site — were evacuated from the building Monday morning.

Authorities on Victory Boulevard yesterday said they believe the 50 new, unoccupied condominiums caught in the cross fire of foam will require some repairs including new roofing. The developers of the units, Lloyd Fetner and Morton Meltzer, could not be reached for comment.

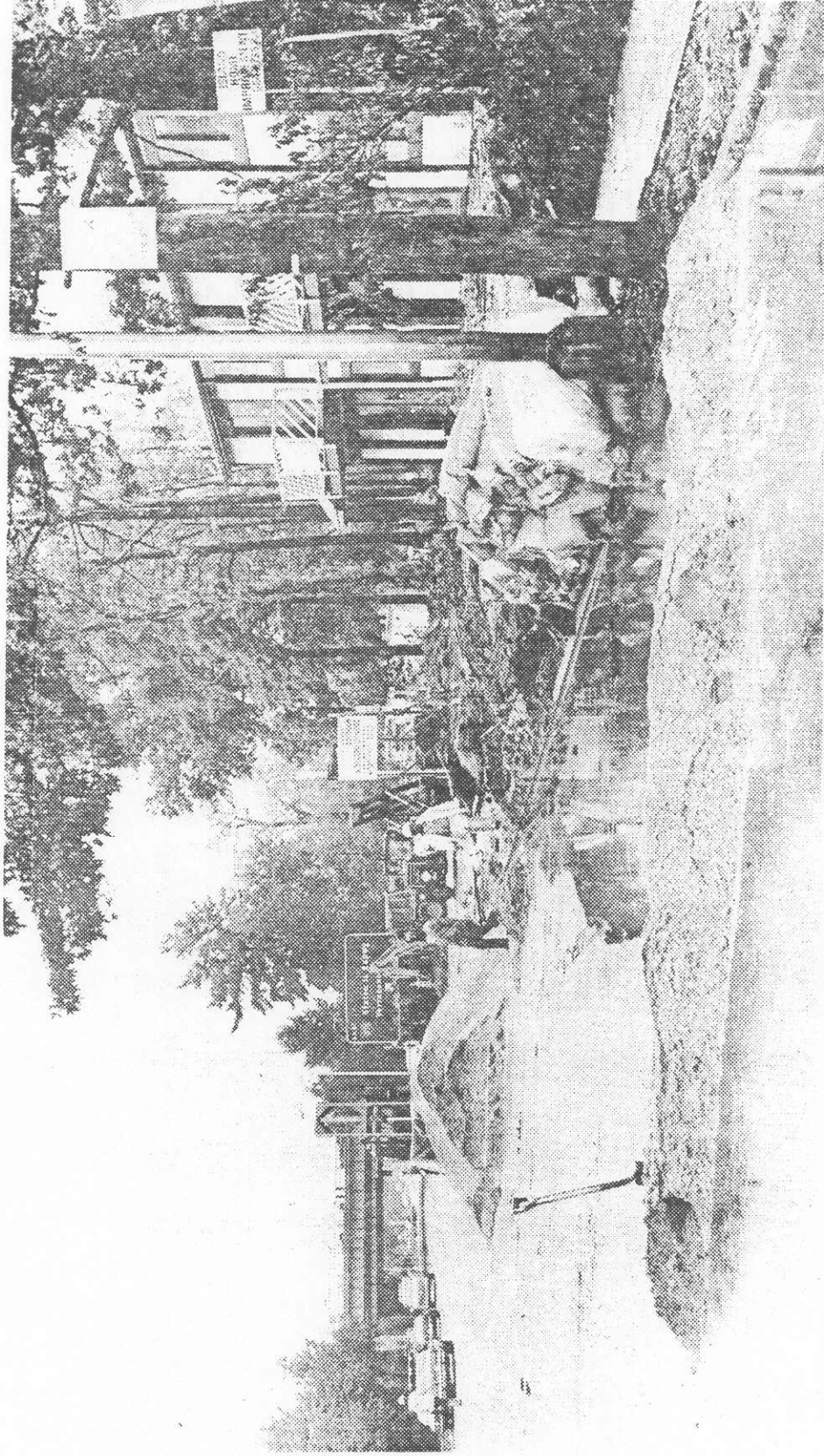


Workers remove the gasoline-soaked sand near the spill site.



Buildings Department inspectors survey the site of the ruptured pipe.

-Island news



S.I. Advance Photos by Frank J. Johns

Piles of sand are still holding back the water and fuel residue as workers inspect the spill's damage.