

Editorial Page

Our opinion/

The pipeline tragedy that never happened

All things considered, it could have been much worse.

The gas leak in Willowbrook Monday was a huge mess. It tied up traffic on Victory Boulevard, Richmond Avenue and the Staten Island Expressway. It forced the evacuation of 30 homes and a pre-school. It cost thousands of manhours and hundreds of thousands of dollars to clean up. And it cost the temporary sanity of scores of frightened Staten Islanders.

But that was all. No lives were lost. Only one man was hurt — the worker who was thrown from the construction site by the 60-foot gasoline geyser. Otherwise, no other person was even treated in a hospital.

It had the potential to be much worse. It had the potential to be the biggest disaster in Staten Island history. Had the gas been ignited by even the smallest spark or flame, the entire area might have turned into a deadly inferno, with heavy loss of life.

But it didn't happen; the disaster never occurred. It wasn't just dumb luck. It was the result of a lot of good planning and hard work.

Emergency teams practice for this kind of thing all the time. The Fire Department conducts a simulated fuel leak, with an all-hands emergency response, once a year. They pray it never happens, but they are ready if it does. It happened Monday and all the hard work and training paid off. Everything fell into place just as it should have.

Homes and streets were not permanently damaged. Contaminated land around the gas spill will be removed and replaced. No long-term health effects are expected. Sewers are no worse for the wear. Even the creek in the William T. Davis Wildlife Refuge came through the ordeal in relatively good shape.

Everyone involved deserves a big hand. The police, the firefighters, the emergency rescue crews, the environmental clean-up crews, the Coast Guard, the volunteers — everyone performed beautifully. They turned what could have been a disastrous situation into an inconvenience.

That is the good news. The bad news is that it happened at all.

On the surface, it appears to be just a freak accident, the kind of thing no one could have predicted. A worker with a backhoe accidentally hit the gasoline pipe, creating a 60-foot geyser that proved difficult to cap. It wasn't a result of bad policy; it was the result of human clumsiness.

Still, we suspect many Islanders will see new dangers in these old pipelines, now that they've tasted a near-disaster. For the record, there are 15 such pipelines on Staten Island, only three of which actually traverse the borough. They carry gasoline, petroleum and natural gas.

Yes, the potential for disaster is there. Anytime you have that much fuel pumped that far, through densely populated areas, the possibility of an accident can never be discounted. But it is a minute possibility. It is worth planning for, it is worth being concerned about, but it is not worth panicking over.

The Buckeye pipeline — the one that broke Monday — is equipped with an automatic cutoff that trips when more than 1,000 gallons is leaked. The leak Monday spilled 35,000 gallons. Yet firefighters had to manually turn off valves at the accident site. That raises a serious question: Did the automatic cutoff fail? If Buckeye won't say, then the city must investigate. Our safety depends upon it.