

Pipeline passes test; pumping to resume

By JIM HUGHES
Advance Staff Writer

Fire officials last night permitted a pipeline company to resume pumping gasoline through a line that ruptured Monday and spewed 35,000 gallons of explosive fuel around Victory Boulevard in Willowbrook.

After officials from the Buckeye Pipe Line Co. sent a high-pressure stream of water through a two-mile stretch of the pipe yesterday, fire officials said they were satisfied the line was leak-free.

During the test, police closed a number of streets in the vicinity, creating a traffic jam on Richmond Avenue and leading some area residents to think another emergency had occurred.

Roy Haase, a spokesman for Buckeye, said the Linden, N.J.-based company expected to resume sending gas through the 12-inch pipeline sometime this morning.

The pipeline, which transports gasoline for such major oil companies as Exxon and Getty, runs underground from Linden, N.J. through Staten Island and on to Kennedy International and LaGuardia airports in Queens. Much of the gas winds up in storage tanks in Long Island City, where it is sold to service stations throughout the city, according to Haase.

On Monday morning, a contractor hired by Buckeye struck a valve gauge on the line, sending a 60-foot geyser of gas into the air. More than 90 people had to be evacuated from nearby homes and buildings, and more than 200 firefighters scrambled about for

hours coating the fuel with a fire-retardant foam.

Police were forced to cordon off a three-quarter-mile stretch of Victory Boulevard from Willowbrook Road to Richmond Avenue. Officials used vacuum pumps through the night Monday before they were sure most of the errant gas had been recovered.

By late last night, fire officials were satisfied that the damaged gasoline valve had been replaced, and that the pipe had no other leaks. To prove it, Buckeye officials released water from Linden that rushed through the pipe at 2,000 pounds per square inch over a period of four hours, ending about midnight.

Haase said the streets were closed off for 45 minutes during the beginning of the test because fire officials feared that the road would be torn up if the pipe ruptured.

"I'm sure we have a lot of irate commuters, but we have to think of safety first," he said.

The sight of fire vehicles and blocked streets during the test caught residents by surprise and left some thinking that the danger of an explosion had returned.

"We didn't know anything about it," said Carol Pasquale, who lives on Sommer Avenue. "We thought there was another emergency. My girls were coming home from shopping and they panicked."

Edward LaRocca of Paulding Avenue said his daughter and her children fled his home in fear. He said residents should have been informed of the test either through a public address system or a radio broadcast.

"They threw this whole community into a panic," he said. "Nobody knew what was going on."

Buckeye officials monitored a two-mile stretch of the pipe near the leak as the water passed through to Long Island City. Haase said the water went through the pipe at a pressure about four times as great as the gas normally does.

Jim Hansen, an assistant chemical engineer with the Fire Department's Division of Fire Protection, monitored Buckeye's tests on Graham Avenue in Bulls Head before giving his approval to fire dispatchers late last night.

Fire officials said yesterday that they are still investigating the incident.

Although the pipeline was considered repaired, some residents on Darcey Avenue in Willowbrook said yesterday they are fearful living near the line. Most of the residents had to abandon their homes Monday morning when the gas started gushing.

"It makes us think we're going to die," said one man who did not want to be identified. "How can the city make it safer? Can we believe in the future that we won't have more trouble like this?"

Another man, who also did not want his name used, said he has lived on Darcey for 15 years but had no idea the pipeline was only several hundred feet from his home.

"We're living on a time bomb," he said, "I think if my kids still lived here I'd move. I'm not happy living on a time bomb. I saw enough of that in the war."