

METPRO

Reporting Test Class of 2018-19

NAME _____

DATE _____

Instructions:

Assume the following four stories contain feeds from reporters in the field. Your job is to write as quickly as possible the best stories you can. There is no time limit, but bear in mind that in an actual situation each story would be posted immediately to the web, so speed and accuracy are important.

Use a separate sheet for each story and analysis. For each story, please consider the following:

- What is the most important news of the day? Write the story, then tell us why you constructed it that way.
- Note any discrepancies, factual errors and legal or ethical issues.
- What further reporting, if any, do you think is needed?

These stories are fictitious, created only for this test. The sources quoted and the events presented should not be taken as real.

Story 1, Friday

RIVERDALE – Todd and Rachel Smith were about to sit down to dinner when their house began to shake violently. It was just after 6 p.m. and Todd Smith, 56, was looking forward to a meal of steak and potatoes. Rachel Smith, 54, gasped as she glanced out the kitchen window and saw a flaming geyser shooting high into the air from down the street. “At first it looked weirdly beautiful,” she said. “Then I realized something was terribly wrong.”

Two houses away, Jeanine Hernandez, 36, thought the massive explosion had been caused by an airplane crashing at nearby Riverdale Municipal Airport. “I went outside and could feel the heat from the fire down the street. It was that intense. If I hadn’t fled, my skin would have melted away.” Hernandez said she had sense enough to grab her purse and flee as the fire quickly spread. “My house is gone. Everything is gone,” she sobbed. “I’m trying to keep from breaking down.”

According to authorities, a massive explosion, believed caused by a natural gas pipeline break, sparked a raging inferno that consumed a north Riverdale neighborhood shortly after 6 p.m. Friday evening. At least one person was killed and nearly two dozen others were injured. At least 170 homes were damaged or destroyed in the raging inferno, authorities say.

Riverdale Fire Chief Bill Markus at the scene of the devastation says the enraged fire is burning across 10 acres and is only 50% contained, as of approximately 10:06 p.m. Fire crews from around the state are rushing to Riverdale’s aid, Markus said. “This fire is humongous and incredibly tough. I’ve never seen anything like it,” the fire chief says, gasping for air.

The underground pipeline exploded near the intersection of Cloverdale Avenue and River Lane, Police Chief Ken McMichael says. The blast ignited a wind-driven fire whose flames rose hundreds of feet into the night sky. McMichael said 53 houses in the blast zone were leveled and at least one resident was confirmed dead, with a number of people still unaccounted for and the death toll expected to mount.

The explosion was so powerful that it knocked out power and water to the entire area, complicating firefighting efforts, Markus complained. Some fire crews were forced to string together hoses to hook up to working hydrants two miles away.

As flames continue to rage out of control, help is pouring in. Four air tankers, two smaller attack planes and 25 fire engine crews from the state Department of Forestry were heading in to help Riverdale firefighters, as well as firefighters from surrounding cities.

Survivors of the fiery holocaust are congregating at The Claremont shopping mall, where insurance agents and building contractors were passing out business cards and offering to help. The American Red Cross is setting up an emergency shelter at the Riverdale High School gymnasium for residents who have nowhere else to go. Scores of those wounded in the blast were being taken to Good Samaritan Memorial Hospital and other nearby medical facilities. A number of them were reportedly suffering from severe burns.

Riverdale Mayor Clyde Mathewson, surveying the scene of the devastation, said, “Our hearts and prayers go out to those who lost their homes tonight. This is a horrendous occasion, but the people of Riverdale are strong, and together the city will overcome this tragedy.”

Tara Jamieson, a spokesman for the Riverdale Gas & Electric Co., which owns the pipeline, confirmed that a rupture had caused the explosion, but cautioned that until an investigation was completed she could not speculate on what caused the pipeline to rupture. “If it is ultimately determined that we were responsible for the cause of this incident, we will take responsibility,” she said. “Until then, our thoughts go out to everyone affected by this situation.”

The worst natural gas pipeline explosion in U.S. history occurred on Aug. 19, 2010, in Carlsbad, N.M., killing 12 people.

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Story 2, Saturday

RIVERDALE – They smelled it first. The gas. They felt it next. The explosion, low and steady, as if the earth was growling, then with a sudden urgency that shook the foundations of their homes.

Investigators with the National Transportation Safety Board, who are investigating the mishap, say they are looking into reports that residents smelled gas in the weeks before Friday night's explosion. One obvious possibility is corrosion in the 30-inch pipeline that is part of a distribution network of natural gas. A final report on the incident is not expected until next year, said NTSB Vice-Chairman Howard Soroya. Riverdale police are treating the blast site as a possible crime scene until foul play is definitely ruled out, Police Chief Kent McMichael said.

Officials with Riverdale Gas and Electric Co., which owns the pipeline, vowed to cooperate with federal investigators, but refused to comment on the cause of the explosion. "It does no one any good to point fingers at this stage of the game – before any of the facts are in," company vice-president Earl Stuart said.

The quaint neighborhood of ranch-style houses looks like a strange moonscape, with burned down homes still smoldering. The air is thick and acrid. Tires on vehicles parked on the street are melted, trees charred. A number of houses were reduced to skeletal remains, with only fireplaces still standing or porch stairs leading to nowhere.

A 30-foot crater in the middle of a north Riverdale neighborhood is all that is left in the aftermath of a devastating explosion and fire that killed at least four people, including a mother and child, totally destroyed at least 53 houses, and injured at least 52 people, a few of them critically, authorities reported Saturday.

The dead have not yet been publicly identified, pending notification of relatives.

Fire Capt. Joseph H. Hallsworthy was at Fire Station #4 just downhill from the devastated neighborhood when the explosion occurred at 6:06 p.m. "It shook our station right to its foundation," Hallsworthy said. He sounded a four-alarm fire and headed out with his engine crew, the first responders at the scene. Residents were fleeing the area, he said, some on foot, some in cars, some carrying pets or other personal items, some in socks, a woman in a pink bathrobe. "We were overwhelmed," he said. "So much is gone now."

Winds estimated at 30 mph quickly spread the conflagration, which some estimated reached 1,200 degrees and rose as high as 1,000 feet into the night air. It was finally declared under control just after dawn this morning, Fire Chief William Marcus said.

The Riverdale explosion, one of the largest ever, occurred just as RG&E and other pipeline operators are working to comply with a costly, federally mandated inspection and safety management program.

"If this was the result of a routine systems failure, then we need to begin to examine all these pipeline systems very carefully," said James L. Monroe, a Colorado State University engineering professor and a famous infrastructure specialist.

Meanwhile, at Riverdale High School, where an emergency shelter was hastily set up by the American Red Cross, residents stood in long lines to talk to insurance adjusters. Many hadn't been back to their neighborhood and didn't know if their homes were still standing.

Gail Gillian, 59, and her 83-year-old mother were both in pajamas inside her mother's house on Cloverdale Avenue when the explosion nearly knocked them down. Gillian raced to a bedroom to grab some clothes, but the heat was so strong that it burned her face. She tried to wet a towel to hold it against the burn, but there was no water. Both mother and daughter escaped.

For now, Gillian has no desire to see what remains of the house. "Nothing really to see except ashes," she said. She began to cry.

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Story 3, Sunday

RIVERDALE -- On Sunday morning, hundreds of residents, some wearing gauze bandages on arms and legs, jammed a town hall meeting at St. Bruno Church to express anger and frustration at being prevented from returning to their homes. A few of the fire victims seemed to be wearing the same smoky clothes they threw on as they fled from their burning homes Friday night. Yet, the thronging crowd gave a standing ovation to Riverdale's police and fire chiefs and an even warmer reception to news that many of the residents of the 271 evacuated homes would be allowed to return to their neighborhood later in the day.

"In a split second, our lives were changed forever," Mayor Clyde Matthewson, who is up for reelection next year, told the residents who packed the church's pews. "This has been a tragedy of unfathomable magnitude."

The cause of the disaster remained an open question, with officials at Riverdale Gas & Electric Co. claiming that the blown pipeline had passed an inspection just last year. RG&E is re-inspecting all the natural gas pipelines in the area, said Earl Stuart, company vice-president.

Although some residents reported smelling gas in the days before the explosion, Stuart said the utility had combed through two-thirds of the consumer calls received in the week before the blast and found no record of any gas-leak reports. Nor, he added, was there any record of repair crews responding to the area. The pipeline, Stuart said, had been installed in 1956.

Elsewhere in Riverdale, an outdoor disaster emporium of sorts was established at a nearby parks and rec center, where companies and nonprofits offered help to the displaced -- carpet cleaners, insurers, animal services organizations, even volunteer ministers with the Church of Scientology dressed in firefighter-like yellow gear. The local Rotary Club served snacks, and there is a large amount of donated food, clothing and basic necessities.

Harmony Dixon said she was grateful for the help. "It's nice to know that companies around here have a vested interest in the community and are here to help," she said. Harmony, 41, hasn't been allowed back to her home since flames chased her out and destroyed her backyard deck. "All I could grab were my two cats, my two birds and my dog," she asserted.

The death toll from Friday night's major disaster mounted to seven, as the search continued for six other people still missing in the disaster. This tally came from Riverdale Police Chief Kent McMichael. However, the Riverdale County Coroner's Office disputed the number of dead, saying they had only four bodies.

Officials with the National Transportation and Safety Board, which is overseeing the investigation, said the cause of the explosion has not been established.

The sheer power of the blast was evident during a limited media tour of the disaster area. There is a crater 167 feet long and 26 feet deep in the middle of the 900 block of Cloverdale Avenue. A 30-foot section of pipe was hurled 100 feet. In addition to creating a crater, the blast completely destroyed 53 houses, partially damaged 117 others and injured dozens, Fire Chief Bill Markus says.

Among the dead identified so far are Jennifer Reyes, 21, who had decided to go to her boyfriend's house to watch an NFL game on TV. She worked at a local clothing store and attended Riverdale Community College, where she was majoring in fashion design. Also killed were Tammy Griggs, 13, an eighth-grader at Riverdale Middle School, where she was the student body president, and her mother, Stella Griggs, 43, an account manager for a local building contractor.

The other four dead had not yet been publicly identified.

Story 4, Monday

RIVERDALE – Mayor Clyde Matthewson begins his day Monday attending a double funeral, helping to lay to rest a mother and daughter who were fatally wounded in a natural gas explosion that claimed the lives of at least two others.

Matthewson, a stocky man of 64, has been mayor of what he likes to call “the best little city in America” for the last 11 years. The city’s population is 44,000 and has an annual budget of around \$22 million. He has overseen the city’s response to a disaster that has totally destroyed 53 houses, killed at least four people and caused an estimated \$65.4 million in damage.

“This has been the toughest time of our lives,” he told funeral gatherers. “But if you need help, we’re here. If you need someone to talk to, we’re here. We have the resources in place and we’re ready to give you a hand in rebuilding your lives.”

As the mayor was attending the funerals Monday of Stella Griggs and her daughter Tammy, federal investigators were investigating whether work done on a city sewer pipe two years ago played a role in Friday’s natural gas explosion. The city used a method known as “pipe bursting” to enlarge the sewer line just west of the explosion site. Experts say such a method could potentially cause ground movement and disturb or displace adjacent underground utilities.

The sewer work in 2009 involved enlarging 1,600 feet of pipe along River Lane that was causing sewage overflows. Joseph H. Welles, director of city Public Works, said Monday that he didn’t think there was a direct connection between the sewer project and the gas explosion.

Howard Soroya of the National Transportation and Safety Board, which is heading the instigation, said Monday that the sewer project will definitely be scrutinized for its possible impact. Soroya stresses that there are multiple factors that can contribute to catastrophic infrastructure failure.

Records released Monday showed that the owner the pipeline, Riverdale Gas & Electric Co., received the OK from the Public Utilities Commission in 2009 to spend \$5 million of ratepayer money to replace a high-risk section of 30-inch pipeline north of the blast site, but never performed the work. After conducting a corrosion test, the company decided to postpone the work.

“There’s no excuse for deferring maintenance of potentially compromised pipelines that run underneath people’s homes, businesses and schools,” said Bill Maxwell, executive director of Utility Watch, which released the records Monday.

RG&E officials on Monday sought to reassure the public that the steel pipeline that exploded last week had been inspected regularly. The company completed a comprehensive external assessment for corrosion last November and did a leak survey in March, said RG&E Vice-President Earl Stuart. In addition, Stuart said, the company patrols gas transmission lines on foot once a year to look for anything that could cause damage, such as construction, and for evidence of leaks, such as dying vegetation.

Meanwhile, survivors Monday packed into buses and entered the burned-out neighborhood for their first view of the devastation. There was an American flag hanging from a telephone pole near the large crater in the middle of Cloverdale Avenue.

Robert Lloyd Jr., 65, a retired police officer, stared at his home of 33 years, reduced now to charred stucco, an SUV in the driveway just a burned out hulk. “All those memories – gone,” he says.

Gertrude Hilldegarten, 81, a lifelong resident of Riverdale, didn’t need an escort back to her house. A retired RG&E payroll employee, she made it through her garage door just before the explosion knocked out power Friday night. Hours later she borrowed a flashlight and walked past police and firefighters down her darkened street. Miraculously, her house was untouched. She went inside and fell asleep. The next morning she awoke and walked through the neighborhood to survey the damage. More than a dozen houses had been reduced to smoldering ashes. “I couldn’t stop crying,” she said.

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