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The Beach Reporter News Article regarding RBEP lack of preparedness

This is a reprint of today's Beach Reporter article on a scary incident that occurred recently at the AES plant which is currently applying for a new license to generate power in Redondo Beach. I have commented previously on the AES corporation and its lack of cooperation with its city partners. Here is a blatant example:

The City of Redondo Beach is demanding answers about a natural gas leak at AES on Friday, Aug. 28 which led to the fire department nearly breaking down the power plant's gate since no one was there to let them in.

“We need an explanation as to why no one was at the security gate and we need to know what steps AES is taking so this doesn't happen again,” said Mayor Steve Aspel at Tuesday's night's city council meeting. “We need to know the estimated amount of natural gas that was leaked, the risk of an explosion, the potential health risks to the public and to the workers including OSHA and Cal OSHA.”

Both Redondo Beach and Hermosa Beach fire departments received dozens of calls Friday evening from residents who were worried about a foul smell wafting through their neighborhoods. Responders determined that AES was the source of a natural gas leak. The Redondo Beach Fire Department contends the leak lasted for approximately 39 minutes. Dispatch has no record of AES reporting the leak, but instead had plenty of calls from the public.

City manager Joe Hoefgen contacted AES Vice President of business development Eric Pendergraft on Saturday and learned that Pendergraft was unaware of the incident.

“He did not believe the source of the gas leak was AES. Then in a follow-up communication with him he shared that the source of the leak was a release valve that released the gas for safety reasons. On Monday we received a write-up stating the leak lasted 19 minutes, when our records indicate it was 39 minutes. Their account reflects communication with our dispatch, but ours shows none,” Hoefgen said.

In the explanation Pendergraft sent to the city on Monday, he said the plant experienced a minor equipment failure which “tripped” one of four generating units which caused a safe shutdown of the system. Natural gas safety relief valves then automatically opened, releasing the gas into the atmosphere over the course of 19 minutes. Pendergraft said the safety device functioned “as designed” causing the release of gas and the odor.

The cause of the “trip” was a faulty control system part on the low-pressure natural gas system that supplies fuel to the steam generator. The generating unit was reset, restarted and released for normal operations approximately 30 minutes after the event.

At the meeting Tuesday, Council voted to send a letter to AES requesting a full accounting of the incident and to explain discrepancies in the initial report. The city is also sending letters to California Energy Commission and to the South Coast Air Quality Management District to inform them about the incident.

In an interview Wednesday, Pendergraft said AES is still looking for answers.

“We are still in the middle of investigating a series of details about what happened and why no one was at the gate to open it for the fire department and why they were unable to reach anyone by phone,” Pendergraft said. “We do have 24-hour security at the gate. We are unsure as to whether the security guard was helping safely shut down the leak or if he was doing rounds, which he does periodically.”

Pendergraft apologized for the “nuisance caused from the odor” and vowed to investigate further.

“We will send the results of our investigation and will make corrective action in place where we find that it needs to be done so that this doesn't happen again.”

Fire Chief Robert Metzger said, “Our concern is lack of notification. As we rolled in we had no idea how bad it was. We had the same concerns about rolling in through the gate without knowing what we were dealing with. There was no information from any authority from the plant, and not being able to contact anyone at the gate, our hands were tied and it made us feel helpless.”

Aspel said he was out of town and only learned about the incident due to his phone blowing up with texts and Facebook messages. This is absolutely unacceptable, he said.

“We need to be notified when something like this happens. Running a city is not just between 8 and 5. If someone breaks a window at a liquor store, that's no problem, but with something like this, we should have been contacted. Someone from AES should have contacted me and Bill Brand (the District 2 representative).”

Brand said AES previously contacted him when routine loud noises might concern citizens. He said he is confused as to why no one reached out to the city about Friday's leak.

“I don't know what happened there. This is much worse than some noise. The plant manager used to call us, and when they would get a new (manager), they would call to introduce us ... The CEC is in the process of considering issuing AES a permit. They should put the screws on permitting any AES sites. AES's response to this is so cavalier” their attitude is unbelievable,” Brand said.

Council member Steve Sammarco said Friday's incident points to a bigger issue:

“It's kind of funny, but really not funny at all, that no one was at the front door of the power plant. Doesn't it seem wrong that Eric Pendergraft says safety comes first, yet no one was at the door? We've stumbled upon a process that didn't work. How can we make this work? We need to address emergency preparedness.”