

SUBJECT: Annual testing of natural gas piping systems in schools

COMMITTEE: Energy Resources — favorable, with amendments

VOTE: 5 ayes — Holzheuser, Hawley, Davis, Merritt, Moffat

0 nays

4 absent— Driver, Smithee, Torres, Wilson

WITNESSES: For — Charles Matthews, Railroad Commission

Against — Joe Ramos, Texas Association of School Boards; Richard Powell, Texas Association of School Administrators

On — Mary L. McDaniel, Railroad Commission

BACKGROUND : Nursing homes and day care centers are required to perform annual pressure tests on their natural gas distribution piping systems to monitor for gas leakage.

DIGEST: HB 1611, as amended, would require school districts to perform annual pressure tests on their natural gas distribution piping systems in each school before the beginning of each school year. With year-round schools, the test would have to be conducted and reported by July 1 of each year.

The pressure test would be required to determine whether the natural gas piping downstream of the school meter held at least normal operating pressure over a specified period of time as determined by the Texas Railroad Commission (TRC). Upon request, the commission would have to help a school district develop test procedures.

Each school district would have to provide its natural gas company with a written notice specifying the date and result of the pressure test. The gas company would be required to maintain the notice for a year. The company would have to terminate service to a school facility if it received official notification from the firm or person conducting the test of a hazardous

natural gas leakage or if a district failed to perform a required test. Any leaks also would have to be reported to the local school board.

The TRC would be responsible for enforcing compliance with these requirements. A gas company would not have any compliance responsibilities.

The bill would take immediate effect if finally approved by a two-thirds record vote of the membership in each house. School districts that could not perform the testing before the beginning of the 1997-98 school year would have to do so as soon as practicable.

**SUPPORTERS
SAY:**

HB 1611 would help protect the 3 million children in Texas schools from the possibility of a natural gas leak or explosion. Texas has already seen one such tragedy, in 1937 when a natural gas explosion in New London killed 300 people, mostly students at a school. Since 1980 schools have reported more than 70 gas leaks to the TRC, and as school facilities continue to age, the risk of leaks increases. It makes no sense that Texas requires nursing homes and day care facilities to be inspected but not public schools.

The pressure test is one of the easiest tests to perform; it simply requires attaching a small pressure gauge to the meter installation, injecting 10 pounds of air pressure through the pipe, and waiting an hour to see if the pipes hold the pressure. If they do not, the system has a leak that must be repaired. The pressure test is a proven effective means of determining the presence of a leak; other tests are not as reliable or accurate.

Most of the larger school districts have plumbers on staff who could easily perform these tests without additional cost to the district. In the event that a plumber had to be hired, the cost would work out to about 35 cents per student — a very small price to pay for safety and piece of mind. Most smaller school districts use liquid propane gas systems rather than natural gas systems and would not be affected by this bill.

HB 1611 would impose a statewide standard because common sense, unfortunately, has not prevailed in this area. Some school districts do not conduct these tests; others do so, but at sporadic intervals. If this is an “unfunded mandate” on school districts, it would be one with a minimal

cost, especially when compared to the lives that could be saved. The TRC would be properly exercising its authority to enforce compliance with this safety issue. This is just as important as the policy issues dictated to local school boards by the Texas Education Agency.

**OPPONENTS
SAY:**

The vast majority of school districts are already conducting these tests voluntarily because its the sensible thing to do. Most districts require testing and have it incorporated in the contract with the local natural gas provider. There is no need to make this a statutory mandate on school districts.

The costs of complying with testing requirements may work out to pennies per student, but those pennies add up quickly. Mandatory line testing could cost Texas school districts anywhere from just under \$2 million to almost \$3.5 million statement.

Most city ordinances require a master plumber to conduct a gas pressure test; for smaller school districts, hiring a master plumber could be costly. There are also other less expensive tests, such as the sniffer, shut-in and electronic device tests, that could be used. HB 1611 should give school districts more flexibility to determine the most appropriate test for their operations and resources.

**OTHER
OPPONENTS
SAY:**

HB 1611 would leave several problems unresolved. For one thing, it would not apply to private schools, which teach a sizeable number of young Texans. For another, the TRC may not be able to adequately conduct inspections or assist school districts in testing lines. The commission has only 28 inspectors to make sure gas companies around the state receive notification of the testing.

NOTES:

The committee amendments would specify that year-round schools would have to conduct and report the test by July 1 of each year; that the gas company would only be required to terminate gas service upon receiving official notification of a gas leak; that the TRC would enforcement compliance; and that natural gas leaks would have to be reported to the local school board.

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The companion bill, SB 963 by Shapiro, was reported favorably by the Senate Education Committee on April 18.