THE VPU QUARTERLY

a newsletter published by Virginia Public Utilities

January 2021

The office will be closed on the following dates:

January 1st
January 18th
February 15th
April 2nd

VPU — QUICK NOTES

KNOW THE SMELL OF NATURAL GAS—BE SAFE!

If there is a faint smell of natural gas, call VPU at 218-748-7540.

If in doubt, leave the building immediately & call 9-1-1.

STREET LIGHT OUT?

If you notice a street light that is burnt out or flickering, please call VPU at 748-7540 so that we may get it fixed and keep our streets bright!

Before You Dig, Contact Gopher State One Call

Dial 8-1-1 or 800-252-1166 or www.gopherstateonecall.org

CHECK YOUR WALL PATCHES

If you have steam heat in your home, or there is active/hot steam in the service line to your home…

Periodically check the wall patch where the steam enters your building for leaks.

If you have a vacant property please check property often, as damage can occur quickly…

Call 748-7540 with questions.

Steam Conversion Update

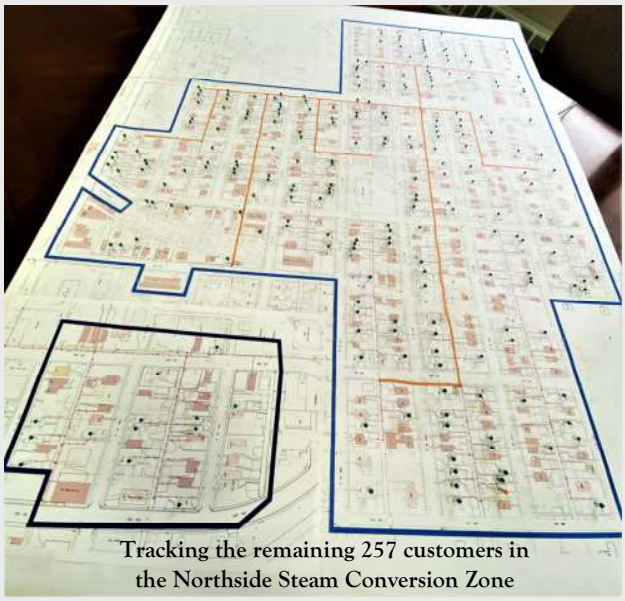
Preparing for the final shutoff of Southside steam

This past November saw the complete shutdown of the Southside Steam Conversion Zone. Three years ago, we had 749 customers in this zone that needed to convert and, for the most part, they did.

We at the Utility want to take this time to thank all involved in working through this project. First, we want to thank our Southside customers who largely took this challenge in stride and "got 'er done". I'm not going to deny that there were people who waited until the last minute, because there were. But I'd estimate these amounted to less than 5% of the total 749 who needed to convert. We also want to thank the contractors who stepped up their game and have really been a key factor in the success of this effort. Lastly, we should recognize the contribution of our own staff who have supported the gas service line installations, prepared and hung gas meters, and have taken phone call after phone call answering your questions and responding to your requests.

This project started with 1,252 customers (749 on Southside and 503 on Northside) and we are now down to 257. Roughly 965 of them converted, an average of 313/year, while another 30 either winterized or abandoned their residences. We have completed 464 loans totaling $8.44 million and another nearly $3 million in the 210 loans that remain in process. The Utility has provided roughly $94,000 of direct financial assistance to low income homeowners in the form of a 15% discount off their conversion costs and have provided another 80 some customers with professional assistance with their conversion at a cost of $70,000.

Now we shift our focus to completing the Northside Steam Conversion Zone. We began last year's final push on the Southside in April. This year we are starting in January. As of December 18th, we have 257 customers who have yet to convert. Two dozen of those we know are either winterized or have not used steam for quite some time. That leaves 233. At this time last year, we had roughly 375 residents on Southside who had not converted. Suffice it to say, we are in a much better position than last year. We will begin shutting off the valves on Northside on November 1st, 2021. If you're one of the 233, please start addressing this matter now rather than waiting. Contractors typically fill their book of business quickly.



Tracking the remaining 257 customers in the Northside Steam Conversion Zone

The Facts on Gas Pilot Lights

For many years, "standing" pilot lights were kept burning 24/7/365 in fireplaces, water heaters and furnaces. You probably remember seeing that little blue flame on your grandmother's gas stove. Pilot lights are largely a thing of the past for gas-powered furnaces and boilers, as well as for most other gas-burning appliances, such as stoves and water heaters. Today's furnaces and boilers ignite the gas using electronic ignition systems. If your old furnace or boiler has a small round knob on the gas valve with the words OFF/ON/PILOT, you have a standing pilot ignition.

A pilot light is a small, continuously burning flame that is used to ignite the burners in older gas furnaces, and older boilers. Many gas fireplaces, stoves and inserts operate with a standing pilot light. The flame is monitored by a thermocouple that is designed to shut off the gas valve to the pilot light in the event that the pilot goes out or is burning inefficiently. This relatively simple technology has been around for years and has been proven to be very reliable. The thermocouple makes sure gas flow is delivered to burners only when the pilot light is lit. A thermocouple is about the diameter of a pencil and a couple inches long. A small wire connects it to the gas valve. The pilot light heats one end of the thermocouple and, with that end hotter than the other, the temperature difference produces a small electric current which opens the gas valve. The normal position of a gas valve is closed, so, without the valve being supplied these millivolts of electricity, it cannot open.

An electronic ignition system does not utilize a standing pilot light. The pilot is on only when the fireplace is operational. After you turn the fireplace on, or your thermostat calls for heat from your furnace or boiler, an electric current creates a spark that ignites the pilot light, which, in turn, ignites the fuel as it flows into the burner assembly. This type of electronic ignition system is called IPI, or Intermittent Pilot Ignition.

But what about when the chips are down and an ice storm, heavy snows or high winds cause a power outage? First, furnaces or boilers are not built to operate without power, because without the air or water moving through the furnace or boiler, the internals of the unit will be damaged. If your fireplace has a standing pilot light ignition system it will ignite normally without power. If it has an electronic ignition system it will operate normally without power provided the fireplace has back-up batteries. Depending on the size of the gas burner, a substantial amount of radiant heat can be generated from the fireplace. But, without power, the fireplaces blower fan will not operate.

On rare occasions there may be a gas outage, most often resulting from a contractor hitting a gas main. In a typical gas main hit, our first objective is to secure the area and try to keep people out. Then we get the gas shut off and make the repairs. Before we turn the gas back on, we go to every affected house and lock off the gas to the house. Once the main is turned back on, we go to every house to either relight their pilots, or get some assurance that the customer can relight the pilot themselves. Then we pull the lock off the gas riser and turn the valve on. If no one is home, the valve remains locked off and we leave a door hanger requesting the customer contact us. Once we hear from the customer, we go out immediately and turn the gas back on safely. In situations like this, units with electronic ignition will operate properly once the gas is restored. Any gas unit that uses a pilot light will need to be relit. Thus, a properly operating standing pilot light is your first line of defense. Our procedures, although they can be a hassle, are put in place as an additional safety measure, a second line of defense, just in case the house has a pilot without a working thermocouple – a situation which could be very dangerous.