

## Columbus proposes \$649,000 settlement for homeowners in Upper Arlington gas explosion



Columbia Gas' headquarters in the Arena District.  
MICHAEL HOUGHTON/COLUMBIA GAS



By Carrie Ghose – Staff reporter, Columbus Business First  
Nov 19, 2018, 5:14pm EST Updated Nov 20, 2018, 6:41am

The city of Columbus has proposed nearly \$649,000 as its portion of a settlement payment to owners of homes damaged by a catastrophic natural gas explosion in Upper Arlington in 2015. Columbia Gas of Ohio told Columbus Business First it also has reached a confidential settlement amount with plaintiffs in several lawsuits.

Upper Arlington's proposed settlements total \$80,000, the city said, covered by the Central Ohio Risk Management Association and insurance.

A gas leak filled the basement and exploded a home at 3418 Sunningdale Way in March 2015, causing damage to surrounding homes, some irreparable. Numerous lawsuits by homeowners were consolidated in Franklin County Common Pleas Court in 2016.

Upper Arlington owns its water system, but Columbus operates it. The city's settlement will come from Columbus' water operating fund, as did a separate \$37,500 settlement paid to a different homeowner in 2016.

Columbus denies liability but wants to end the litigation, according to the proposal up for a vote Monday by Columbus City Council.

"After two and a half years of hard work, we're glad the parties were able to work cooperatively toward an agreement. These settlements are a fair resolution for everyone involved," said a statement from City Attorney Zach Klein.

According to the original complaint by the homeowners, Hidefumi and Mariko Ishida, Columbia Gas had abandoned a gas line in the 1990s, but failed to disconnect and seal it properly. In 2000, Columbus' water division misidentified that line as a water line, and neither utility caught the error for years. A plumber at the home twice called the water division to shut off water during a repair in March 2015, and the technician instead manipulated the abandoned gas line, damaging a valve, leading to the leak and explosion about a week later.

The Ishidas were not at home, but lost all of their possessions. Their proposed payment is the largest in Columbus' offer: \$216,089. The home was rebuilt at a cost of \$450,000 in 2016, according to the Franklin County Auditor's office.

The city's offer is \$77,500 to the homeowner across the street, whose house was rebuilt for \$550,000; and \$62,500 to the next-door neighbor, with \$278,000 in repair costs, according to auditor records. Other payments range from \$5,000 to \$50,000 to 13 homeowners. Part of each payment goes to attorneys.

State energy regulators in 2015 fined Columbia Gas \$200,000 for its role in the explosion.

The state's largest natural gas utility is part of NiSource Inc.

Indiana-based NiSource and subsidiary Columbia Gas of Massachusetts separately face a criminal investigation and class action litigation over a series of September explosions in Lawrence, North Andover and Andover that killed one man, injured dozens and damaged more than 100 structures, according to the Boston Business Journal.

In the Upper Arlington case, paperwork for the full settlement with all parties is being processed in court, said Keith Karr, a Columbus attorney representing several of the homeowners, but not the Ishidas. I left a message with their attorney in West Virginia.

The settlement helps recover financial losses, he said, but many are still experiencing emotional trauma.

"Several of their homes were just totally destroyed. ... It was a war zone when it happened," Karr said. "Do you think you could ever recover from that?"

"When you do a settlement, you do the best you can for your client based on the facts you've got," he said. "They try to pick the pieces up."