

Severed gas line forces evacuations

St. Charles mishap also closes bridge and streets

By Josh Stockinger

Daily Herald Staff Writer

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A grocery store and strip mall in downtown St. Charles were closed much of Friday morning and part of the afternoon after a broken gas line forced them to be evacuated.

A contractor working on the First Street redevelopment project accidentally struck the line shortly after 7:30 a.m. near Illinois and First streets.

The Blue Goose Super Market at 164 S. First St. and businesses in the Fox Island Square complex were closed after Nicor crews turned off gas to the properties. Authorities also shut down the Illinois Street bridge and several streets in the area to traffic, including part of Route 64 for a short time.

It took nearly five hours to repair the damage. Firefighters reported no injuries and allowed the businesses and streets to reopen around 1:30 p.m. after safety inspections.

Fumes also seeped through telephone ducts and into the basement of the Hotel Baker, prompting an inspection — but no evacuation — there, as well.

David Lencioni, president of Blue Goose, estimated that he lost two-thirds of the day's business while closed. Still, he said he expected a few setbacks given the scale of the \$105 million redevelopment effort.

"There are going to be bumps in the road. They're going to run into some things they didn't expect," said Lencioni, who is relocating his business as part of the redevelopment. "This is the only problem we've had so far."

The First Street project started last fall, after more than four years of planning.

Scheduled for completion in 2012, it is expected to revamp six blocks west of the Fox River with quaint retail, residential and office developments.

Despite Friday's accident, officials said they consider the project to be on schedule. Work is expected to commence at the Illinois and Indiana street intersections and be complete by early February.

Regular updates on the progress of the First Street redevelopment are available at www.1ststreetstc.org. The city also is taking questions and comments related to the project at (630) 762-7097.

jstockinger@dailyherald.com

Morning gas leak closes Route 64

By KELLEY CASINO - kcasino@kcchronicle.com
and ERIC SCHELKOPF - eschelkopf@kcchronicle.com

ST. CHARLES – Excavators cut a 2-inch gas main Friday under First Street, causing the gas to spread into neighboring buildings and forcing an evacuation of several businesses.

"It's not good," Bull and Bear tobacco shop owner Zita Harmon said. "This is on top of the project impairing our ability to find parking spaces."

The utility construction on First Street is related to the more than \$100 million First Street Redevelopment Project, which will improve the corridor between Main and Prairie streets with residential, office and commercial space.

The gas line was cut as crews were installing an electric duct just after 7:30 a.m. The leak was fixed by Nicor crews about 1:30 p.m.

Bull and Bear was just one of the businesses in the Fox Island Square shopping center that had to close because of the gas leak. The store was able to reopen at 2 p.m.

Nancy Curtis, manager of The Wine Exchange, said she was surprised to see fire trucks when she arrived for work at 11:30 a.m.

"I didn't know what was going on," said Curtis, who later spoke to a Nicor Gas worker who told her what happened.

The Wine Exchange also was able to reopen at 2 p.m.

The gas line struck by the excavator was a service line to the Fox Island Square building at 1 W. Illinois St., which was evacuated. The Blue Goose Supermarket, 164 S. First St., also was evacuated after fire officials picked up gas readings there. St. Charles Fire Department Assistant Chief Joseph Schelstreet said employees at Harris Bank, 50 S. First St., self-evacuated.

The Illinois Street bridge was closed the repair of the line, and eastbound Route 64 was closed for about an hour Friday afternoon.

Fire officials were forced to close the state route after gas was found to be traveling underground and through phone ducts into the basement of the Baker Hotel. Mancovers were pulled to ventilate the area but caused a traffic hazard.

"That ventilated it and stopped the problem," Schelstreet said. "But once we did that, it made it very hazardous for cars to travel down the road."

Schelstreet said the odor of the natural gas was strong throughout the downtown.

"We had a strong wind this morning, and it pushed the odor to the north, so it was evident in the west side of downtown," he said.

The two Nicor crews called out to fix the leak were on the scene until approximately 1:30, when the succeeded in tapping into an 8-inch main to fix the problem.

As of Friday afternoon, most local business employees had re-occupied their buildings and re-opened.

"People were understanding and cooperative," Schelstreet said. "It's a difficult situation, but they were cooperative with us and we were able to take care of it with no injuries."