

CITY OF BALTIMORE

BRANDON SCOTT – MAYOR



ZEKE COHEN - COUNCIL PRESIDENT



OFFICE OF COUNCIL SERVICES

NANCY MEAD – DIRECTOR

100 N. HOLIDAY STREET

BALTIMORE MD, 21202

HEARING NOTES

LO25-0025

Underground Infrastructure Safety

Committee: Public Safety

Chaired by: Mark Conway

Hearing Date: 7/22/2025

Time (Beginning): 1:00 PM

Time (Ending): 4:00 PM

Location: Du Burns Council Chamber / Webex

Total Attendance:

Committee Members in Attendance:

Council President Zeke Cohen	Chair Mark Conway
Vice Chair Zac Blanchard	Isaac “Yitzy” Schleifer
Paris Gray	Phylicia Porter

Bill Synopsis in the file? ☒ YES ☐ NO ☐ N/A
Attendance sheet in the file? ☒ YES ☐ NO ☐ N/A
Agency reports read? ☒ YES ☐ NO ☐ N/A
Hearing televised or audio-digitally recorded? ☒ YES ☐ NO ☐ N/A
Certification of advertising/posting notices in the file? ☐ YES ☐ NO ☒ N/A
Evidence of notification to property owners? ☐ YES ☐ NO ☒ N/A
Final vote taken at this hearing? ☐ YES ☐ NO ☒ N/A

Major Speakers

(This is not an attendance record.)

Department of Transportation – Patrick Fleming, Chief of Staff	Fire Department – James Wallace, Chief
Kahlil Zaied, Deputy Mayor of Operations	Department of Transportation – Ola Olamide, Chief of Conduit Division

Vicinity Energy – Tricia Keegan, Senior Vice President of Operations	Vicinity Energy – Samay Kindra, Government Affairs Manager
Vicinity Energy – Jeannie Morris, Senior Director of Government Affairs	BGE – Trey Spear, Government and External Affairs Specialist
BGE – Tom Rafferty, Director of Regional and Electric Operations	BGE – Brittany Jones, Director of Government and External Affairs

Major Issues Discussed

- Chair Conway offered some opening remarks
 - We have had several recent underground fires and a hearing took place last year wherein we were unable to determine a clear cause
 - We want to ensure the safety of residents and protecting critical infrastructure
 - How do BGE's capital and maintenance investments
- DOT provided a presentation on the system – available in bill file
- BCFD provided a presentation on recent fires – also in file
- Vicinity provided testimony
 - Background on vicinity system
 - 12 major cities
 - In Baltimore provides steam, hot, and chilled water
 - 30 million square feet
 - Suggests safety is Vicinity's #1 priority
 - 24hr manned response center
 - 2-hour max response time
 - At most recent fire
 - On scene immediately – nothing to indicate vicinity system was cause or damaged
 - Able and willing to assist in investigation and provide information as needed
 - Similar circumstances to last year's fire on Charles St.
 - 2023 – underground excavation touched vicinity system but no issue with vicinity system itself
 - Does not want to obfuscate but indicates Vicinity does not believe it was at fault – although happy to help
 - Specific safety and maintenance processes
 - Engage with Miss Utility to identify underground
 - Document discrepancies
 - Manholes reviewed twice yearly
 - Emergency responders have direct contact information for vicinity centers
 - Endeavoring to strengthen OEM
- BGE
 - Offered any assistance with aid to investigation
 - Would like to assist with modernization
 - Installing 264k feet of new conduit
- Questions
 - Council President

- Recognizes aging infrastructure AND obligation to ensure residents are safe, regardless of their neighborhood
- In addition to human-safety, these incidents cause financial distress
- Who is in charge and who bears responsibility for fixing it?
 - DOT – owns and maintains, leading the charge on ensuring safety
- What does the coordination look like?
 - Conduit division chief – coordinate with utilities; BGE usually given first priority; monthly meetings with BGE to address trouble spots
- Deputy mayor for operations – this is a city asset and we are committed to ensuring that it is a healthy and valuable system
- Have heard concern from residents expressing lack of overall coordination
 - Communication not timely or effective – who is responsible for what
- How is it managed? What is the long-term fix?
 - Deputy Mayor – on communication – will ensure that residents and businesses receive ample notice and information
 - On long-term – will bring in expert(s) to determine what really happened to prevent moving forward
- Thank Councilman Blanchard and the Chair for holding this hearing
- Hopes that a more refined plan to improve response from city and partners AND protect businesses and residents
 - A clearer cleaner plan
- MOGR – working to expedite permits to reopen businesses and providing free marketing to impacted businesses
- Chair Conway
 - Only so many things that can cause a fire
 - To ensure safety and security, particularly downtown, we have to understand what those potential causes are
 - Recognizing limitations – what do we know about what led to this fire? And, what can cause fires in the conduit?
 - Chief Wallace – need an ignition source, what was burning was at least the wiring and cable
 - Power arcs can be so dangerous that it is difficult for fire to get a first hand view
 - Can also stretch from manhole to manhole
 - We are working to determine what caused the most recent fire – applaud administration for bringing in a forensic investigator
 - Do we have a sense of how long it will take for RTI to have findings?
 - DOT – mid to late fall
 - No way to guarantee safety without knowing the cause
 - Chief Wallace – power arcs can be enormously loud and dangerous; equipment is always treated as energized until informed by carrier otherwise
 - No one is put underground to fight the fire
 - What are potential solutions to resolve causes?
 - DOT – receiving report will improve coordination with BGE for improvements moving forward
 - Does this require upgrades to the conduit?

- DOT – would assume so but cannot say for certain; wants to allow analysis to determine what needs to be done
 - Deputy Mayor – it is an old conduit system 16-17 million linear feet; investments are certainly needed; critical that we are in tight coordination with tenants; will increase inspections to determine what is needed inside manholes
 - For example – will read temperatures inside manholes for gas leak purposes
- How do we determine who is responsible for upgrades in light of the 2023 agreement with BGE? Are they capital investments or maintenance?
 - Division chief
 - Anything necessary to upgrade the system is a capital improvement
 - Conduit meets with bge every month
 - Present potential upgrade locations to BGE at the beginning of each fiscal year
- Is that consistent with our agreement?
 - Currently \$120 million over four year span, have spent about \$75 million so far, leaving \$44 million remaining
 - Nothing prevents the city from spending additional money on capital investments
- Would the capital investments have any impact on rates?
 - BGE pays the conduit fee – that is dollar for dollar rate recover
 - \$44 million remaining for capital investments
 - Capital investments allow BGE to charge premium on rate of investments
 - Capital investments are not a dollar-for-dollar cost increase they are amortized
 - BGE – cost is spread over the life of the asset, so real-time benefit is a savings to current rate payers
- We don't know what the necessary investment will be, we already have an agreement with BGE, would further investment mean additional cost in BGE rates
- Original \$120 million is built in, any further investment from BGE would need to be further built in?
 - Yes, either way there is rate impact
- Because we don't know how big this cost will be, we should ensure that any further investment is not passed onto rate payers – encourages BGE to consider
 - Vice Chair Blanchard
 - Impact to businesses was significant
 - Not here to assign blame, wants to ensure this does not happen again
 - When will we have the results of the investigation
 - DOT – mid to end of fall
 - What does the investigation entail?

- Deputy city solicitor – Hope to have something in early fall; working with RTI to go into conduit system and looking at damaged infrastructure
 - Very complicated and difficult because of damage to infrastructure
 - Includes physically entering the conduit, camera work, infrared, etc.
- Will results of report be fully available to the public?
 - Yes – findings and recommendations shared with council which can make it available to the public
- What did inspections look like prior to 2023?
 - Division chief – inspections conducted during installations, inspect for defects when entering manholes
 - If any issues – division would return to investigate and determine if repairs are needed
 - No program for proactive inspections – only occurs when permit pulled
 - 15-20 a year
 - Currently 5 city inspectors, 10 contract inspectors
- Would it be beneficial to have proactive inspections in high-risk areas?
 - Deputy mayor – yes
- Do we have a plan in place to conduct proactive investigations?
 - Will work to develop one
- CM Schleifer
 - To vicinity – no indication that recent June 28th fire was related to your system?
 - Vicinity – no but happy to continue conversation
 - Bold to claim considering investigation is on going
 - We park in this area and go to Camden yards for Orioles games
 - There is a large amount of steam coming up all over downtown
 - Have to assume that steam has some effect
 - What is the reporting mechanism for residents concerned about increase in steam? Who is it reported to? What is the process?
 - Vicinity – steam can be caused by rainwater; vicinity crews did not believe it was their system but reiterates willingness to help
 - Is there a meter or measurement of how much steam is coming from a specific location? it has only increased over the years
 - We do take measurements
 - Vicinity
 - 24/7 (410) 625-4555
 - How is it inspected?
 - Safety team evaluates system condition to determine source of apparent vapor
 - Blowers can be used to dissipate steam – they are used temporarily and are typically electrically powered, may use temporary compressor for liquid fuel, or small generator
 - Ground water can be pumped out
 - If steam is leaking out of the pipe it is an issue with vicinity system

- Wants to avoid having water in system – water can act like a bullet
 - Sometimes reach out to other utilities to inform of city water leak, etc.
- Is the reporting number marketed?
 - Requests marketing material
 - Will provide in addition to contact information for government affairs staff
 - Will also ensure first responders have contact info
- CW Porter
 - New technologies that other cities are using for underground fire detection
 - Have we considered any sort of AI camera mechanism?
 - BCFD – to evaluate as they are happening?
 - Do not have anything sub-surface
 - Could we create a sensor mechanism to provide information to city and partners in real time?
 - Deputy mayor – can look into this
 - Agreement indicates that city is responsible for repairs when a partner is not deemed responsible for the incident, would city pursue if partner was responsible
 - City law – yes
 - What happens with maintenance when the current lease term expires?
 - Could be negotiated with BGE
 - Not confident that maintenance will be performed within the current lease term
 - To MOGR and Deputy Mayor – are we prepared to continue with maintenance if we exceed the remaining \$44 million BGE will contribute as a capital improvement
 - Would need to come from the general fund, is a matter of prioritization
- CM Gray
 - Vicinity earlier suggested the 28th of June incident was an electrical fire
 - Vicinity apologizes for misspeaking
 - Vicinity reiterates that the June 28th incident did not implicate its system
 - When was the last inspection of downtown corridor
 - Every manhole is inspected twice a year
 - On conduit side – it is a continuous occupancy agreement – inspections are ongoing
 - Right now we are working in silos and would ask that the Mayor's office could convene working group/task force that brings agencies and utility companies together to work hand in hand to centralize inspections, reporting, etc.
- Chair Conway
 - Brings up BCFD data showing two years with significantly higher fire totals (2018 and 2024)
 - BGE powerlines are the sensitive infrastructure that can cause a fire
 - What occurred over those two years that led to the dramatic increases?
 - Will make some suggestions, but not accusations

- Water and power lines?
 - Charge overwhelms lines?
- We need a comprehensive scope and broad understanding
- Attention here is safety
- Do we need to better protect BGE lines?
- We should be problem-solving together
- Could BGE share information on loads during fires
- BGE – electrical cables CAN cause fires but there ARE other factors that could be at play
- Public testimony
 - We should expedite the response to these issues – lucky that there have been no casualties to date

Further Study

Was further study requested?

☒ **Yes** ☐ **No**

Request	From	Agency	Expected Timeline
Outline on a plan for proactive inspections of high-risk areas	Blanchard	DOT, BCFD	2 weeks - 8/5/25
Marketing material including information on where residents can report concerns related to steam or other Vicinity infrastructure	Schleifer	Vicinity	2 weeks - 8/5/25
Commit to releasing Vicinity's investigation when City releases its investigation into June 28th incident, as well as an additional report following any potential City findings that suggest Vicinity's system was involved	Gray	Vicinity	Upon release of City investigation (expected mid-fall)
Develop framework for a working group task force among city agencies and underground service providers to improve communication and inspection of underground infrastructure	Gray	MOGR, DOT, BGE, Vicinity	1 month - 8/22/25
Investigation and assessment of how AI technology could be implemented to assist with underground fire detection	Porter	DOT, BCFD	2 weeks - 8/5/25

Ethan Navarre,

Date: 7/22/2025

Cc: Bill File
OCS Chrono File