
CITY OF BALTIMORE

Brandon M. Scott – Mayor
Zeke Cohen – Council President



Office of Council Services

Nancy Mead – Director
100 Holliday Street, Room 415
Baltimore, MD 21202

PUBLIC SAFETY COMMITTEE

The Honorable Mark Conway
CHAIR

HEARING NOTES

LO25-0025

Underground Infrastructure Safety

Hearing Date: 3/3/2026

Hearing Start Time: 1:00 PM

Hearing End Time: 3:00 PM

Location: Du Burns Council Chamber / Webex

Total Estimated Attendance:

Committee Members in Attendance:

- **Chair** Mark Conway
 - Phylcia Porter
 - Danielle McCray
 - **Vice Chair** Zac Blanchard
 - Paris Gray
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MAJOR SPEAKERS

(This is NOT an attendance record.)

- Patrick Flemming – Chief of Staff, Baltimore City Department of Transportation
 - Sterling Sumwalt – Senior Manager, Conduit Division, BGE
 - Khalil Zaied – Deputy Mayor for Operations
 - Tom Rafferty – Director of Regional Operations, BGE
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NOTES

- Chair Conway began the hearing with some opening remarks
 - Baltimore's conduit system was built because public safety required it
 - We dealt with repeated urban fire risk because of overhead lines
 - The purpose of the conduit system was to reduce ignition sources
 - Baltimore was one of the earliest cities to build and maintain underground conduit networks
 - Baltimore, unlike other cities, has retained ownership of its conduit
 - The people of Baltimore chose to keep the system in public hands
 - Infrastructure built for public safety must remain accountable to the public
 - The RTI report describes combustible gases building over time due to the conduits use beyond original design intent
 - The findings show a system under sustained strain
 - Did the current conduit agreement include clear enforceable lines of maintenance

- or did it introduce ambiguity
 - The structure of the agreement may allow risk to persist
 - Perhaps we should consider restructuring the agreement
 - This hearing should build on that record
- DOT shared its presentation (in bill file)
 - RTIs report was focused on September 29, 2024
 - Report made 14 recommendations
 - Cable separation – crowding concentrated downtown
 - Working with lessees to reduce crowding
 - DOT policy prohibits duct sharing by fiber optic and electrical
 - Manhole enlargement
 - DOT keeping record of manholes that need enlargement
 - Enhanced monitoring
 - Worked with peer agencies to determine how to proceed
 - Sensors for heat, gas, humidity, water – with network connectivity
 - Development of risk map
 - System mapping
 - Emergency plan
 - Fire and OEM have developed emergency response plans
 - Carbon dioxide truck
 - BCFD is exploring potential acquisitions
 - Underground safety meetings
 - Participates in monthly coordination meetings
 - And separate monthly meetings with BGE
 - Manhole covers
 - Housing actions
 - Citiwatch footage
 - Additional video documentation
 - Evidence preservation
 - Laboratory testing
 - Manhole chambers
 - Ensure electrical and fiber optic cables are stored separately
 - Design limits restrict this effort but work is underway
- Questions
 - Chair Conway
 - We first need to understand what caused these fires and why these efforts will prevent future fires
 - The apparatus that we use is important
 - How old is the conduit infrastructure in the Charles St corridor and what is the expected lifetime
 - About 100+ years old
 - This specific corridor is from 2001-2002
 - What was the original capacity for manhole 87
 - When the fire happened – an issue of spacing, extra cables and splice boxes
 - Was it overcrowded before the fire

- Meet with heads of all conduit lessees to discuss the mission and vision of conduit improvements and report on the outcome of that meeting to the committee
- Councilwoman McCray
 - What are the potential costs of a carbon dioxide truck
 - Could be up to \$1 million
 - Have we considered sharing that with other counties? Would there be any cost-sharing
 - We have mutual aid agreements with Baltimore County for example
 - We could discuss with the counties
 - Has a budget request been submitted by the Department?
 - No, BCFD has been in talks with DOT about the appropriateness of the vehicle
- Councilman Gray
 - There needs to be collaboration between all parties
 - Did DOT believe that the situation in figure 1 of the RTI report would cause an issue
 - DOT did but not the extent of the potential issue
 - Charles street in particular is completely filled
 - Space is very, very limited
 - Did lessees see this situation and did you have any concerns? Was there any notification to DOT?
 - BGE – we submit a report to the 311 system if there are issues with space related to other lessees occupancy
 - Please submit elsewhere, in addition to 311
 - BGE – 311 is a system of record
 - Also follow up with DOT
 - This is not literally 311 – it is a backend app
 - Vicinity – does not use the conduit but will take back to teams for instances that it may appear as an issue
 - It's hard to believe that, with all the subject matter experts, not one person thought this would be an issue
 - Are there any conduits anywhere along this corridor where the electrical and fiber cables are still touching?
 - Some remain
- Chair Conway
 - The report was helpful in explaining what caused the fires
 - gases accumulate from the deterioration of the wire covers
 - The report mentions arcing but does not explicitly state whether that could be the ignition, please explain arcing and why the proximity and gas accumulation are issues
 - What recommended changes would reduce those risks
 - BGE
 - Cables only put off gas when damaged
 - We do not know what caused the arc
 - Aging infrastructure could fall on a cable

- Faults in cables will clear themselves but gases can catch fire if not ventilated
 - One of the recommendations is monitoring and improvements
 - We need to create more space between fiber and electrical
 - How do we pay for this?
 - Under the agreement BGE pays \$120 million – how much has gone to manhole enlargement and congestion relief
 - Installed roughly 30 new manholes
 - Also rebuilt 17 existing manholes, all but one was increased in length
 - Also built 300,000 feet of new conduit
 - Also addressed roughly 800 obstructions
 - Could BGE send us a list of the infrastructural investments since the agreement
 - That is already sent to Councilmembers on a monthly and yearly basis
 - Please send it again
 - We need to determine that we are prioritizing the appropriate infrastructure
 - New report should be coming soon
 - We didn't we focus on this area – manhole 87
 - BGE – we partner with Baltimore city to determine what to rebuild
 - DOT has indicated they have a list of congested manholes, can DOT share that list
- Councilwoman Porter
 - When was this BGE report most recently sent
 - Last month
 - We have not received that
- Chair Conway
 - Asks that BGE provide list of improvements made
- Vice Chair Blanchard
 - Are there any other cities, that you are aware of, making improvements as recommended by the report?
 - Cities with similar ages are facing very similar issues, not necessarily doing it better, many are working to implement similar
 - Important to examine what other jurisdictions are doing well
 - We may even be somewhat ahead in commissioning a study to examine causes
 - We are also unique in owning our own conduit system
 - Would appreciate a deeper look into any work by other cities
 - There is not a jurisdiction leaps and bounds ahead
 - DOT has reached out to other jurisdictions to learn
- Chair Conway
 - What is the process for escalating concerns
 - Did we notify BGE of a problem after the January 2024 fire
 - lessees had begun relocating splice boxes taking up space
 - Why didn't we escalate that effort – BGE?
 - BGE inspected its equipment and found it to be safe
 - DOT was working to clear the manhole, it takes time
 - Why hadn't manhole 87 been addressed or put on a priority list

- The decision to invest is ultimately BGEs
 - Does BGE have a list of congested manholes?
 - It may
 - When did we request an expansion of manhole 87 after the January 2024 fire
 - It was not an expansion, but a rebuild; however, a rebuild is always an expansion
- Both the Comptroller's office of Office of People's Counsel were invited here today
 - The agreement was moved very quickly
 - Please explain the hesitations of the comptroller in the initial passing of the conduit agreement
 - On February 14, 2023, the administration rejected a request by then City Council President to delay a vote on the agreement
 - Subsequently, the Board of Estimates voted to approve that meeting without the attendance of Comptroller or Council President
 - The agreement allows BGE to pass on costs to consumers because it is considered a capital expenditure
 - The agreement is nearing its end, the city must indicate it will negotiate changes by April 4
 - The last day to indicate an extent to exit the agreement is July 4
 - To Office of People's Counsel
 - Independent state agency meant to represent rate payers
 - BGE proposed a recovery of conduit capital improvements from customers
 - BGE would treat its capital improvements the same way it treats a recovery of investments in infrastructure it owns
 - BGE should have come to the commission before the BOE
 - At the end of that case, the commission approved the rate increases
 - BGE as part of the agreement is making capital improvements and recovering all of the costs for its customers but those improvements benefit other conduit tenants as well
 - This is a subsidy by BGE customers to other tenants
 - So, rate payers are paying for these expansions?
 - Yes
 - We are creating space to accommodate the fiber in our conduit and that cost is ultimately being seen on our energy bills
- We are at a decision point
 - To make sure the conduit is safe and ensure we have the funding to improve the conduit while avoiding putting those costs on people paying their energy bills
- Councilwoman Porter
 - My areas experience significant brownouts
 - In above ground infrastructure
 - Public Safety commission does examine reliability
 - Docket 9353 utilities propose changes to improve reliability
 - If we don't establish connectivity, what is the outcome?
- Chair Conway
 - We know we need high speed internet but should people be paying for it through their heat bills

- Vice Chair Blanchard
 - This situation has been incredibly problematic for businesses in the area
 - Charles St is a national urban historic byway
 - Ask that the administration and BGE find ways to get businesses back on their feet
- Public Testimony
 - Businesses suffered significantly due to the fires
 - The uncertainty of whether this will happen again looms over every decision

FURTHER STUDY REQUESTED

Request	From	Agency	Expected Timeline
Ensure that negotiations with conduit lessees are conducted by the end of the calendar year to address funding mechanism for conduit improvements, specifically technological advancements related to sensors and leveraging AI	Porter	DOT	EOY
Meet with heads of all conduit lessees to discuss the mission and vision of conduit improvements and report on the outcome of that meeting to the committee	Porter	DOT	3 months
Provide list of congested manholes	Conway	DOT	2 weeks
Provide list of improvements made under first phase of conduit agreement	Conway	DOT/BGE	2 weeks
Identify when a request for rebuild/expansion was submitted for manhole 87 after the January 2024 fire	Conway	DOT/BGE	2 weeks
Confirm the deadlines for the last day to inform BGE of an intent to renegotiate the agreement and the date to inform BGE of the city's intent to exit the agreement	Conway	DOT/LAW	2 weeks

SEE FINAL VOTE RECORD IN BILL FILE

- Hearing Packet in bill file?** ----- YES NO N/A
Attendance Sheet in bill file?----- YES NO N/A
Vote Record in bill 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 bill file? ----- YES NO N/A
Evidence of notification to property owners in bill file? ----- YES NO N/A

Notes by: Ethan Navarre
 Notes Date: 3/3/2026

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