



BALTIMORE CITY COUNCIL PUBLIC SAFETY COMMITTEE

Mission Statement

On behalf of the Citizens of Baltimore City, the Public Safety Committee will be responsible for matters concerning public safety, including, but not limited to, emergency preparedness, police services, fire/EMS, & their administrative functions.

The Honorable Mark Conway

CHAIR

PUBLIC HEARING

7/22/2025

1:00PM

CLARENCE "DU" BURNS COUNCIL CHAMBERS

LO25-0025

Underground Infrastructure Safety

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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

Meeting: Legislative Oversight Hearing

Committee: Public Safety

LO25-0025

Legislative Oversight – Underground Infrastructure Safety

Purpose:

For the purpose of inviting relevant city agencies & utility providers including but not limited to the Baltimore City Fire Department, Department of Public Works, Department of Transportation, Office of Emergency Management, Baltimore Gas and Electric, Comcast, Verizon, and Vicinity Energy to discuss the safety of Baltimore's underground conduit system in response to ongoing underground fires.

REPORTING AGENCIES

Baltimore City Fire Department	Department of Public Works
Department of Transportation	Office of Emergency Management
Baltimore Gas and Electric	Comcast
Verizon	Vicinity Energy

BACKGROUND

Primarily overseen, maintained, and managed by the Department of Transportation, Baltimore City's Municipal Conduit system has existed for over 115 years and, today, is comprised of approximately 700 miles of underground channeling, spanning between over 12,000 manholes, filled with critical power and networking cables.

Found directly below city streets, ducts made of plastic, fiber, or terracotta encased in concrete stretch between manhole access points to allow for minimally invasive installation, maintenance, and/or replacement of cables from service providers including Baltimore Gas and Electric (BGE), Comcast, and Verizon to local buildings, businesses, and homes.

As the sole owner of the Conduit, the City charges fees on service providers to support the conduit's upkeep. As of September 2015, following an increase from \$.98 approved by the City's Board of Estimates, service providers are assessed a fee of \$3.33 per foot annually to use the system; however, BGE, the system's largest user, objected to this increase and filed a lawsuit to prevent the city from implementing the rate increase. In its lawsuit, BGE alleged the City was violating state law by using the rate increase to generate revenue. Subsequently, in 2016, BGE and the City agreed to a settlement wherein BGE would pay \$2.00 per foot for three years and \$2.20 per foot each year after. More

recently, in 2023, BGE entered into an updated agreement with the City wherein it agreed to contribute \$134 million in capital improvements to the conduit while paying a \$1.5 million annual occupancy fee through December 31, 2026.

In addition to the Conduit system, Baltimore’s streets also sit atop several other major pipelines including water and sanitary main systems, which together are administered by the Baltimore City Department of Public Works and comprised of approximately 2,900 miles of piping within City limits; nearly 28 miles of pipeline administered by Vicinity Energy to deliver chilled water, hot water, and steam; and, extensive underground natural gas lines maintained by BGE.

Over the past several years, the safety of Baltimore’s extensive underground infrastructure system has become a cause of concern for many city residents on account of underground explosions and fires. The following table details a non-exhaustive sample of those incidents over the past several years:

Date	Approximate Location	Incident
June 28, 2025	Intersection of East Baltimore Street and Guilford Avenue	Underground fire
September 29, 2024	300 block of North Charles Street	Underground fire causing manhole explosions
January 25, 2024	300 block of North Charles Street	Underground fire causing manhole explosions
May 16, 2023	400 block of West Pratt Street near Eutaw Street	Steam line rupture causing explosion

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Fiscal Note: The City’s 2023 agreement with BGE has led to a significant reduction in the annual revenue coming into the City’s Conduit Fund. In fiscal year (FY) 2023, the City accrued over \$41 million in revenues from rents, fees, and other income assessed on Conduit service providers, including BGE. The following year, FY2024, the City took in just over \$17 million. However, this marked change in revenues does not account for the \$134 million in capital improvements BGE is required to make under the terms of the 2023 agreement. In addition, Conduit system operating expenses, which account for contractual services required to maintain the Conduit, fell slightly from FY2023 to FY 2024 – from \$12.4 million to just under \$10.2 million.

Information Source(s):

- <https://transportation.baltimorecity.gov/conduit-division>
- <https://www.wbalTV.com/article/baltimore-board-approves-conduit-fee-hike-for-utilities/7096149>
- <https://www.baltimoresun.com/2015/10/16/bge-sues-city-of-baltimore-over-conduit-rate-hike/>
- <https://www.baltimoresun.com/2016/11/30/bge-settles-lawsuit-with-baltimore-plans-to-seek-rate-hike/>
- <https://publicworks.baltimorecity.gov/water-project-history>
- <https://publicworks.baltimorecity.gov/pw-bureaus/water-wastewater/wastewater>
- <https://www.vicinityenergy.us/locations/baltimore/>

- <https://www.wmar2news.com/homepage-showcase/some-roads-to-re-open-by-monday-morning-commute-after-underground-fire>
 - <https://www.wbaltv.com/article/underground-fire-shuts-down-power-downtown-baltimore/46544120>
 - <https://www.wbaltv.com/article/steam-pipe-explosion-water-main-break-repairs-baltimore/43895627>
 - <https://finance.baltimorecity.gov/sites/default/files/City%20of%20Baltimore%20Final%20Audited%20ACFR%20FY23.pdf>
 - <https://finance.baltimorecity.gov/sites/default/files/City%20of%20Baltimore%20Audited%20ACFR%20FY'24%20Final.pdf>
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Analysis by: Ethan Navarre
Analysis Date: 7/15/2025

Direct Inquiries to: ethan.navarre@baltimorecity.gov

Baltimore City Council



Public Safety

Committee

LO25-0025

Underground Infrastructure Safety

Agency Reports



City Council Hearing: Baltimore City Conduit

Patrick A Fleming, BCDOT
Chief of Staff

July 22, 2025



Brandon M. Scott
Mayor

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. | Fast Facts
2. | What is the Municipal Conduit System?
3. | How Does the System Work
4. | Benefits of the System
5. | Management of the System
6. | Emergency Response
7. | Moving Forward |



Brandon M. Scott
Mayor

A historical black and white photograph showing a street scene with several tall utility poles and buildings. The scene appears to be from the early 20th century, possibly during the reconstruction after the Great Baltimore Fire. The utility poles are prominent, with many cross-arms and insulators. The buildings are multi-story and have a classic architectural style. The street is filled with utility wires, and there are some figures and vehicles visible in the distance.

Fast Facts

- First Duct Installations Began in 1900
- Following the Great Baltimore Fire in February 1904, Aerial Utilities Forced Underground
- Initial Construction Investment: \$7 Million
- Currently 3.7 Million Feet of Conduit (Roughly 700 Miles)
- Currently 25 Million Feet of Duct (Roughly 4,735 Miles)
- Over 12,000 Manholes



Brandon M. Scott
Mayor



What is the Municipal Conduit System?

A series of manholes linked together by underground conduits or ducts, forming a network to facilitate the **delivery of power** and **communication services** to City residents and businesses.



Brandon M. Scott
Mayor

Purpose of the System

- Provides Pathways for Electric, Communication, and Fiber Optic Cable Services.
- Houses Both Public and Private Assets
 - City Traffic Signals, Public Safety, and Street Lighting
 - Over 40 Lessees – BGE is the Largest Tenant.



Brandon M. Scott
Mayor

How does the System Work

City Owns Ducts and Manholes that house cables.

- **Lease Agreements with Tenants**

- Lease Conduit Space per linear foot of Cable.
- Lease Revenue Utilized to Manage & Maintain Conduit System.

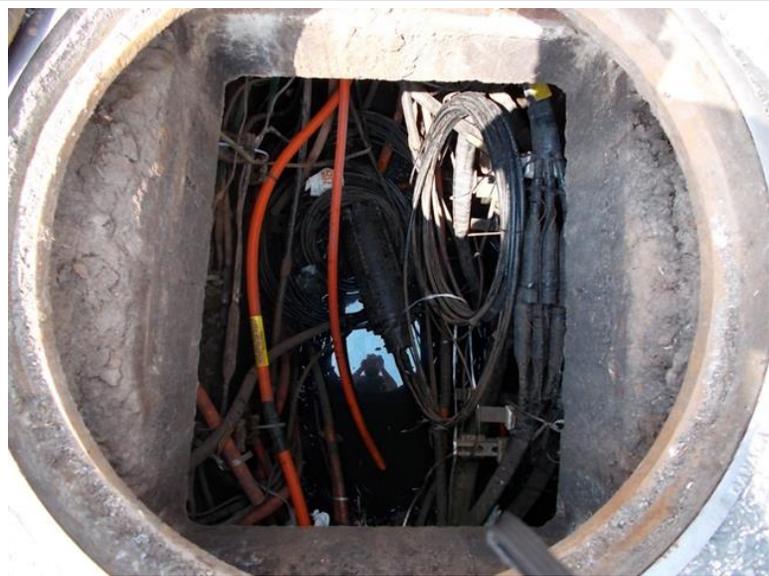
- **Developer Agreements**

- Grows Conduit Asset at No Cost to City.
- New Conduit is Built per City standards to developers needs.
- City assumes ownership at project completion.



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Examples of Inside the System



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Mayor

Benefits of the System

Public Safety

- Signal interconnect, street lights, traffic signals,
- Emergency Agency communications.

Economic Growth

- Infrastructure in place and ready for tenants to provide services.

Municipal Control of Asset

- City oversees activity within Public Right of Way
- Collaboration with other Government Agencies.



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Mayor

Benefits of the System

System Reliability

- Underground utilities reduce likelihood of storm-related outages.

Achieve Citywide Mayoral Initiatives

- B-More Bright
- Smart City
- Build it Once



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Mayor

Management of the System

The mission of Conduit Division in DOT is to provide a reliable and efficient conduit system in a state of good repair.

Conduit Division Responsibilities

- Programs include:
 - Conduit Engineering
 - Plan, Design, Construct, Lease, and Manage System
 - Conduit Field Services
 - Maintain, Repair, and Rehabilitate System
 - Inspect Cable Occupancy
 - Inspect Developer built Conduit assets
 - Conduit Asset Management
 - Maintain conduit infrastructure records using Geographic Information Systems (GIS)



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Mayor

2023 Settlement Agreement

BGE will invest **\$120 million over 4 years into the Conduit system** in lieu of lease fees. BGE also pays the City \$1.5 million per year for maintenance of the system.

The **City still owns and maintains the conduit system.** BGE utilizes the revenue they previously paid to the City to do the major design/construction.

- *To reactively/proactively repair conduit obstructions.*
- *To repair/replace conduit manholes.*
- *To design and construct new/parallel conduit systems.*

Conduit Division manages the planning of where these construction efforts take place and inspects the work while it is performed.

The City ultimately still owns all the assets associated with the City conduit system.



Brandon M. Scott
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Emergency Response

- Arrive on scene and coordinate with OEM and BCFD.
- Contact Traffic for support with street closures and Traffic Enforcement Officers.
- Contact DOT Maintenance for support with signal outages.
- Determine what Conduit assets are involved.
- Work with BGE Underground to determine what needs to be fixed and when.
- Coordinate work for BGE Capital teams to address obstructions.
- Contact Lessees and discuss outages.
- Determine access priority for BGE/fiber lessees for repairs.



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Mayor

Moving Forward

- Working with engineering firm RTI to do a forensic analysis of the Charles St, and South St. fires.
- Part of their analysis is to provide us with contributing factors to fires.
- Then we will work with BGE on making capital investments in the areas with contributing factors.



Brandon M. Scott
Mayor



BCFD Response

Fire Chief James Wallace

July 22, 2025



Brandon M. Scott
Mayor

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. | Overview
2. | Timeline
3. | Map of Previous
Underground Fires



Brandon M. Scott
Mayor



Overview

The Baltimore City Fire Department reports that on **June 28, 2025**, an underground fire occurred in downtown Baltimore, resulting in heavy smoke emanating from multiple manholes. The fire self-extinguished and OEM, BGE and DOT were contacted for support. No injuries were reported, but there was significant infrastructure impact—including steam damage and utility disruption. The origin of the fire is under active investigation.

Timeline

2:57 PM, Saturday, June 28	911 Dispatch receives multiple 911 reports of heavy smoke from four manholes at the intersection of East Baltimore Street & Guilford Avenue, near City Hall
3:00–3:05 PM	Fire units respond and confirm heavy smoke rising from four manhole covers; flames seen shortly thereafter.
3:05–3:15 PM	BCFD crews prepare for fire suppression, delayed due to the involvement of high-voltage equipment. Four manholes are vented to allow smoke and steam to escape .
3:15–4:00 PM	BGE is called to de-energize utilities around the scene for safety. DOT/OEM establishes road closures around East Baltimore & Guilford .
Late Afternoon–Evening	Area secured, BCFD maintains presence and continues to monitor the scene. No known residential power outages, but traffic lights and streetlights are down. BCFD hands command of the scene over to BGE who continued to work through the night.
Saturday Night	BGE crews work through the night to vent additional manholes and patch damaged conduit and ductwork .



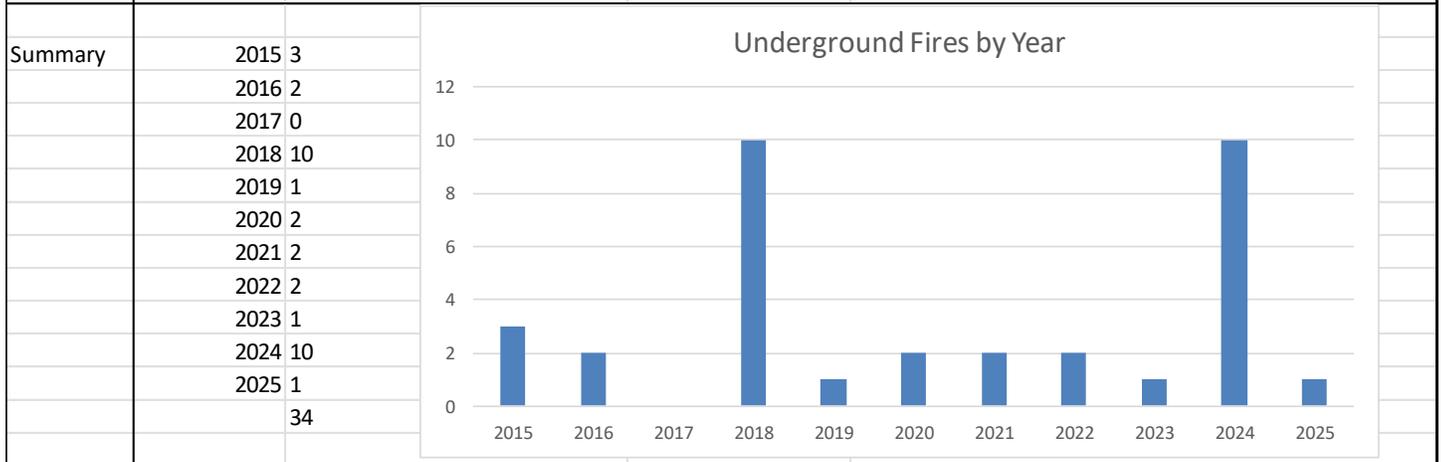
Brandon M. Scott
Mayor

Map of Previous Underground Fires



Baltimore City Fire Department Underground Fire Data

Year	Month	CALL_CREATED_DATE	CALL_CREATED_TIME	LOCATION
2015	February	Sunday, February 22, 2015	17:19:15	1716 THAMES ST
2015	March	Monday, March 9, 2015	23:00:15	GLENMORE AV/HARFORD RD, BAL
2015	June	Wednesday, June 3, 2015	22:36:19	308 N EUTAW ST, BAL
2016	February	Monday, February 15, 2016	18:16:30	14 E CHASE ST, BAL
2016	February	Wednesday, February 17, 2016	21:50:58	1023 E LOMBARD ST, BAL
2018	February	Thursday, February 22, 2018	15:42:51	900 W BALTIMORE ST, BAL
2018	June	Sunday, June 10, 2018	19:31:58	37 S CHARLES ST, BAL
2018	June	Friday, June 29, 2018	13:59:40	6 ST PAUL ST, BAL
2018	July	Sunday, July 1, 2018	19:27:49	425 W BALTIMORE ST, BAL
2018	July	Monday, July 2, 2018	18:50:47	1638 E BELVEDERE AV, BAL
2018	September	Friday, September 21, 2018	10:46:19	E NORTHERN PY/CLEARSPRING RD, BAL
2018	September	Monday, September 24, 2018	18:09:39	N CHARLES ST/E LEXINGTON ST, BAL
2018	September	Tuesday, September 25, 2018	11:03:58	E LEXINGTON ST/N CHARLES ST, BAL
2018	October	Saturday, October 6, 2018	07:45:44	210 E REDWOOD ST, BAL
2018	December	Wednesday, December 5, 2018	14:42:39	3501 SINCLAIR LN, BAL
2019	February	Monday, February 11, 2019	10:28:54	PENNSYLVANIA AV/N FREMONT AV, BAL
2020	April	Sunday, April 5, 2020	22:18:48	233 N CHARLES ST, BAL
2020	August	Tuesday, August 4, 2020	01:50:28	800 BLK W BALTIMORE ST, BAL
2021	March	Monday, March 22, 2021	10:34:16	1406 WHITELOCK ST, BAL
2021	August	Thursday, August 12, 2021	21:39:41	201 E PRATT ST, BAL
2022	January	Monday, January 17, 2022	03:37:42	2100 BLK BOSTON ST, BAL
2022	January	Monday, January 24, 2022	12:31:27	LIBERTY HEIGHTS AV/AYRDALE AV, BAL
2023	August	Thursday, August 10, 2023	02:51:23	22 S GREENE ST, BAL
2024	January	Thursday, January 25, 2024	22:16:29	340 N CHARLES ST, BAL
2024	February	Tuesday, February 13, 2024	10:24:28	FALLS RD/KELLY AV, BAL
2024	February	Wednesday, February 28, 2024	09:03:26	3800 BLK FALLS RD, BAL
2024	March	Sunday, March 24, 2024	12:27:50	220 E LEXINGTON ST, BAL
2024	June	Friday, June 14, 2024	03:24:00	701 S CHARLES ST, BAL
2024	August	Saturday, August 10, 2024	11:21:40	120 E LOMBARD ST, BAL
2024	September	Wednesday, September 11, 2024	16:40:22	W COLD SPRING LN/TAMARIND RD, BAL
2024	September	Sunday, September 29, 2024	03:48:14	323 N CHARLES ST, BAL
2024	December	Saturday, December 28, 2024	19:08:07	235 HOLLIDAY ST, BAL
2024	December	Sunday, December 29, 2024	18:40:22	4236 FALLS RD, BAL
2025	June	Saturday, June 28, 2025	14:42:54	E BALTIMORE ST/GUILFORD AV, BAL



Baltimore City Council



Public Safety

Committee

LO25-0025

Underground Infrastructure Safety

Additional Materials



320 St Paul Place
Baltimore, MD 21202

Written Testimony to Baltimore City Council Legislative Oversight – Underground Infrastructure Safety

July 22, 2025

Greetings, Chair Conway, Vice Chair Blanchard, and Members of the Public Safety Committee,

Verizon has reviewed Baltimore City Council LO25-0025, Legislative Oversight – Underground Infrastructure Safety. The purpose of this hearing is to discuss the safety of Baltimore City’s underground conduit system (“city conduit”), in response to the 2024 conduit fires.

Verizon owns and maintains its own separate conduit system in Baltimore City, as codified in Baltimore City Ordinances Article 26, Subchapter 24, dating back to the 1800s. Per outstanding policy, Verizon’s conduit system, which dates back to Chesapeake & Potomac Telephone Company, and the city conduit may not intersect. Our conduit only contains communication lines and does not carry electric or other more flammable facilities.

We perform ongoing maintenance and network inspection programs to help avoid unsafe conditions. Our inspection programs employ a range of techniques, from manual checks to advanced technological methods like artificial intelligence, ensuring all standards are met.

Since Verizon is not a major occupant of the City’s conduit system, we cannot comment on the status or safety of the city conduit.

Regarding the 2024 conduit fires, we were granted access to our impacted conduit system days after they occurred. We determined we sustained no damage to our conduit, vault, or any facilities within. Additionally, there was no impact to our customers.

Thank you for the ability to comment. Should you have any questions, you can feel free to reach out to me.

Respectfully,

Paul Plymouth

Paul Plymouth

Director, State Government Affairs and Local Engagement

Verizon

**AMENDMENT
TO SETTLEMENT AGREEMENT**

THIS AMENDMENT TO SETTLEMENT AGREEMENT (this “**Amendment**”), as of February ___, 2023, is entered into by and between Baltimore Gas and Electric Company, a Maryland corporation (“**BGE**”), and the Mayor and City Council of Baltimore, a municipal corporation of the State of Maryland (the “**City**”), as an amendment to that certain Settlement Agreement by and between BGE and the City approved on November 30, 2016 (the “**2016 Settlement Agreement**”). BGE and the City shall be referred to collectively as the “**Parties**” and individually as a “**Party**.” Any capitalized term used in this Amendment but not defined hereunder shall have the meaning ascribed to such term in the 2016 Settlement Agreement.

Recitals

WHEREAS, the Parties entered into the 2016 Settlement Agreement regarding, in part, BGE’s use of the Conduit System and the City’s maintenance of the Conduit System; and

WHEREAS, the Parties desire to amend the 2016 Settlement Agreement to provide that BGE shall be responsible for capital expenditures related to Conduit System capital improvement projects pursuant to the terms set forth in this Amendment;

NOW, THEREFORE, in consideration of the mutual covenants, terms, and conditions set forth herein, and for other good and valuable consideration, the receipt and sufficiency of which are hereby acknowledged, the Parties hereby covenant and agree, as follows:

1. **Effective Date.** This Amendment shall be subject to the approval of the Board of Estimates of Baltimore City and, following receipt of such approval and being executed by both Parties, shall be effective as of the date of such approval (the “**Effective Date**”).
2. **Definitions.** The following terms shall have such meanings as are set forth in this Section 2:
 - a. “**Capital Improvements**” shall mean any construction, restoration, alteration, addition, improvement, renovation, or other physical changes or modifications of any nature (excluding Maintenance) in, on, or to the Conduit System, including, without limitation, structural alterations, modifications or improvements to any expansion of the Conduit System, in each case, to the extent that the costs of such activity are or would be capitalized in accordance with Generally Accepted Accounting Principles (GAAP).
 - b. “**Maintenance**” shall mean all maintenance, repairs, non-capital replacements, and related inspections necessary to maintain the Conduit System in good order and proper working condition and suitable for BGE’s provision of safe, reliable, and efficient electric service to customers throughout its service territory.

3. Initial Term; Responsibility for Conduit System Capital Improvement Projects. Beginning on the Effective Date and continuing for a term ending on December 31, 2026 (the “**Initial Term**”), and subject to the terms and conditions of this Amendment, BGE shall be responsible for, and undertake itself and through its contractors, capital expenditures related to Capital Improvements (“**Capital Improvement Projects**”), up to an aggregate cost of One Hundred Twenty Million Dollars (\$120,000,000) during the Initial Term (“**BGE’s Initial Term CIP Obligation**”). The City, in its discretion, may undertake additional Capital Improvements and may continue Capital Improvements that the City began prior to the Effective Date.
4. Maintenance Payments. BGE shall pay (i) an annual fee of Fourteen Million Dollars (\$14,000,000) for the calendar year ending December 31, 2023 and (ii) an annual fee of One Million Five Hundred Thousand Dollars (\$1,500,000) for each subsequent calendar year during the Initial Term (each such annual fee payment, a “**Maintenance Payment**”), to the City for Maintenance of the Conduit System to be performed by the City and which Maintenance Payments shall be used in accordance with Section 10 of the 2016 Settlement Agreement. The Maintenance Payment shall be an annual, non-refundable payment made to the City within ten (10) days following the Effective Date and within ten (10) days following the first day of each of the subsequent three (3) calendar years. The need for Maintenance and the means and methods of performing Maintenance work shall be determined solely by the City in a manner consistent with the City’s past practices in determining the need for Maintenance and the means and methods of performing Maintenance, and the City will consider in good faith any reasonable request by BGE for the performance of Maintenance.

In the event that BGE does not spend the entire amount of either BGE’s Initial Term CIP Obligation or BGE’s Extended Term CIP Obligation (as defined in Section 5 below), all amounts not expended, or not otherwise earmarked and committed for Capital Improvement Projects then under construction, shall be paid to the City by BGE as an additional Maintenance Payment or an additional Extended Term Maintenance Payment (as defined in Section 5 below), as applicable, and in each case shall be expended by the City for the benefit of the Conduit System as determined by the City; provided, that all such amounts shall be expended by the City to perform Maintenance or Capital Improvements to the Conduit System; and provided, further, that any such payments under this paragraph shall not reduce the amount of the Maintenance Payment or Extended Term Maintenance Payment, as applicable, required under this Section 4. Unspent funds may be considered earmarked only if a contract has already been awarded by BGE for such work and such work has commenced as of the expiration of the Term or the Extended Term, as the case may be. Any such funds not expended by the City in any year shall be carried over to the next year and committed to the payment for Maintenance of the Conduit System or for City-funded Capital Improvements.

5. Extended Term. This Amendment shall automatically renew for a succeeding term of three (3) years (such succeeding term referred to herein as the “**Extended Term**”) unless either Party delivers written notice of its intent not to renew to the other Party at least one hundred eighty (180) days prior to the expiration of the Initial Term. During the Extended Term,

and subject to the terms and conditions of this Amendment, BGE shall (a) be responsible for, and undertake itself and through its contractors, Capital Improvement Projects up to an aggregate cost of Ninety-Two Million Dollars (\$92,000,000) (“**BGE’s Extended Term CIP Obligation**”) and (b) pay an annual fee of One Million Five Hundred Thousand Dollars (\$1,500,000) for each subsequent calendar year during the Extended Term (each such annual fee payment, an “**Extended Term Maintenance Payment**”) to the City for Maintenance of the Conduit System to be performed by the City and which Maintenance Payments shall be used in accordance with Section 10 of the 2016 Settlement Agreement. Any Capital Improvement Project begun before the expiration of the Initial Term or the Extended Term must be completed regardless of when the Initial Term or the Extended Term expires, which obligation survives the expiration of this Amendment. At the request of the City at least two hundred seventy (270) days prior to the expiration of the Initial Term, the City may propose and the Parties shall thereupon discuss potential changes in BGE’s Extended Term CIP Obligation or the Extended Term Maintenance Payment.

6. Prioritization and Scope of Conduit System Capital Improvement Projects. BGE and the City shall work in good faith to prioritize and define the scope of work of potential Capital Improvement Projects, including those programs set forth in the Department of Transportation, Conduit Division’s FY 2023-2027 Conduit Capital Improvements Program. All such projects undertaken by BGE shall be designed to enhance the Conduit System in a manner that will help improve its safety, efficiency, and reliability for all users of the Conduit System. The Parties recognize that BGE occupies space throughout the entire Conduit System, and thus, as a general proposition, any Capital Improvement Project will help improve the safety, efficiency, and reliability of BGE’s electric distribution system. Notwithstanding the foregoing, (a) the Capital Improvement Projects shall be in support of and connected with the Facilities and (b) BGE shall determine in its reasonable judgment whether to pursue any specific Capital Improvement Project.

Upon the completion of each Capital Improvement Project by BGE, BGE shall provide the City with “as-built” plans prepared in adherence to City requirements. BGE will submit its inspection results to the City for its review and approval. BGE’s work shall not be deemed to have been accepted until such plans have been received and approved and all inspections have been satisfactorily completed (such plan approvals and inspections not to be unreasonably withheld by the City).

7. Blanket Permit; Expedited Permitting. On the Effective Date, BGE has authorization to conduct any work in the Conduit System permitted by this Amendment. To the extent any additional City permits are required, the City shall make all reasonable efforts to prioritize, escalate and expedite the process for any such permits and shall endeavor to grant any such permit no later than fifteen (15) business days after the date of application or written request from BGE (provided that the permit application is in material compliance with the City’s published written instructions and procedures that are in place as of the Effective Date). If any such permit is delayed, withheld, or withdrawn by the City, BGE’s failure to perform the work for which such permit is required shall not be deemed a breach or derogation of its obligations under this Amendment. The terms and conditions of any blanket permit and any other permits or approvals issued to BGE (including, without limitation, any cure

periods therein) shall not be less favorable to BGE than the City's standard terms and conditions applicable to such permits and approvals. The City shall implement a usual and customary capital inspection fee (the "**Capital Inspection Fee**") to be assessed annually under BGE's blanket permit pursuant to this Section 7; provided, however, that the annual Capital Inspection Fee shall be funded solely by BGE's Initial Term CIP Obligation or BGE's Extended Term CIP Obligation, as the case may be.

8. Review of Capital Improvement Programs. At least one hundred twenty (120) calendar days prior to the start of each City Fiscal Year, the City shall submit to BGE a plan of potential Capital Improvements ("**City Capital Improvement Programs**") that BGE shall consider in good faith for construction during the upcoming City Fiscal Year. Notwithstanding the foregoing, BGE shall determine in its sole discretion whether to pursue any City Capital Improvement Programs and will notify the City regarding same. BGE and the City shall continue to meet monthly and discuss BGE's Capital Improvement Projects, as they have done in accordance with Section 13 of the 2016 Settlement Agreement.
9. Emergency. BGE and the City shall coordinate and cooperate with each other in the event that emergency repairs to the conduit system are necessary. Generally, the City, in furtherance of its Maintenance obligations, shall undertake all emergency repairs. In the event, however, of an emergency that requires Capital Improvement(s) to the City's conduit system involving Facilities, BGE, in furtherance of its obligations related to Capital Improvement(s) pursuant to this Amendment, shall undertake said emergency repairs; provided, however, that all costs associated with any such emergency repairs shall be funded solely by BGE's Initial Term CIP Obligation or BGE's Extended Term CIP Obligation, as the case may be. Notwithstanding the foregoing, if BGE believes that an emergency poses a threat of imminent harm or to any of its Facilities or is necessary to promptly address a BGE customer service request, upon timely notice to the City, under its blanket permit (subject to Section 7 above), and to the extent not prohibited by law, BGE may access the Conduit System to ameliorate the threatened harm. In addressing such BGE customer complaints, BGE shall prioritize service calls based upon its assessments of emergencies and in accordance with its customer service protocols. Notwithstanding anything to the contrary in this Amendment, in connection with BGE's performance of any actions under this Section 9, BGE shall not be liable for any Losses arising as a result of any act or omission of the City, its elected or appointed officials, employees, and agents, whether such Losses are based upon contract, warranty, tort, strict liability, or otherwise.
10. Operation and Maintenance. The City shall continue to be responsible for the operation and Maintenance of the Conduit System as set forth in this Amendment and in the 2016 Settlement Agreement.
11. Conduit System Rental Fee. BGE shall not be assessed any rental or other fees for BGE's use of the Conduit System during this Amendment and any Extended Term. BGE shall be obligated to pay its rental fee for July 1, 2022 through December 31, 2022 of fiscal year 2023.

12. Portions of Conduit System Used by other Users. Except as otherwise contemplated in this Amendment, BGE shall not enter or otherwise access any duct within the Conduit System that is used by other users (and is not used by BGE) without prior written consent from the City which shall not be unreasonably withheld (and, if and as required by the City, the other user).
13. Indemnification. BGE shall indemnify, defend and hold harmless the City, its elected and appointed officials, employees, and agents (the “**Indemnified Parties**”) from any and all claims, demands, liabilities, losses, damages, fines, fees, penalties, costs, expenses, suits, and actions (including reasonable attorneys’ fees and court costs incurred in connection therewith) by a third party, to the extent attributable to bodily injury, death, or destruction of property (collectively, “**Losses**”), brought against the Indemnified Parties, arising as a result of any act or omission of BGE, its officers, directors, employees, or agents in connection with the performance of this Amendment that constitutes negligence, willful misconduct, or gross negligence, whether such Losses are based upon contract, warranty, tort, strict liability, or otherwise; provided, however, that BGE shall not be required to indemnify the Indemnified Parties for any Losses arising out of any act or omission of the Indemnified Parties that constitutes negligence, willful misconduct, or gross negligence, whether such Losses are based upon contract, warranty, tort, strict liability, or otherwise.

BGE shall have the right to control the defense of all such claims, lawsuits, and other proceedings and, upon written request from the City, shall provide the City with status updates regarding such proceedings. In no event shall BGE settle any such claim, lawsuit, or proceeding without the City’s prior written approval (not to be unreasonably withheld, delayed, or conditioned); provided, however, that the City’s prior written approval shall not be required if the settlement (i) contains no finding or admission of liability with respect to the City, (ii) involves only monetary relief which BGE has agreed to pay, and (iii) includes an unconditional release of the City. In the event of any claim for Losses against BGE, its officials, employees and agents, BGE shall not seek to join the Indemnified Parties in such action or hold such persons responsible in any way, except to the extent the Losses arise out of any act or omission of the Indemnified Parties that constitutes negligence, willful misconduct, or gross negligence, whether such Losses are based upon contract, warranty, tort, strict liability, or otherwise. The obligations of this section shall survive the expiration or earlier termination of this Amendment.

14. Warranty. BGE warrants to the City as set forth below in this Section 14 with respect to all work by BGE on any Capital Improvement Project completed by BGE during the Term, for a period of two (2) years after the date of acceptance of the work by the City or such longer warranty period as may be provided by a BGE contractor, (such period, the “Warranty Period”):
 - a. That all materials and equipment installed to construct the Conduit will be new, unless otherwise specified and all work performed by BGE will be of good quality and free from faults and material defects.

- b. That all work shall be performed, in all material respects, in accordance with the requirements of all required permits, plans, specifications, the City of Baltimore, Department of Public Works, Specifications for Material, Highways, Bridges, Utilities and Incidental Structures, Issue of 2006, and any and all Amendments thereto, the City of Baltimore, Department of Public Works, Book of Standards, and any and all Amendments thereto, and all other applicable codes, rules and regulations in effect at the beginning of the Effective Date of this agreement (collectively, the “Applicable Standards”).
- c. That all equipment and systems and each and every part thereof, shall operate in a satisfactory and efficient manner, and in accordance with the Applicable Standards.
- d. That every component and structure shall be watertight and leak proof, as specified in the Applicable Standards.
- e. That BGE shall, upon receipt within the Warranty Period of written notice from the City, replace with proper workmanship and materials, and re-execute, correct, or repair, without cost to the City, all work which may be finally determined~~to be~~.
- f. That no use by the City of any work by BGE or any part thereof, nor any failure to use the same, nor any repairs, adjustments or corrections made by the City in accordance with Section 14(g) due to BGE’s failure to comply with any of its obligations under this Amendment and the Applicable Standards, shall impair in any way the warranty obligations assumed by BGE under this Amendment.
- g. If BGE refuses to make such repairs as are reasonably necessary to bring any Capital Improvement in compliance with the Applicable Standards upon written demand delivered by the City to BGE during the Warranty Period, the City may undertake such repairs as are reasonably necessary to cause such Capital Improvement to comply with the Applicable Standards at the cost and expense of BGE, including reasonable compensation if required for additional professional services, to the extent finally determined that such Capital Improvement was not in accordance with Applicable Standards. BGE shall also bear the expense of making good all work of others destroyed or damaged by BGE’s correction, removal, repair, or replacement of any defective work.
- h. All equipment, systems and other work performed by BGE shall be fully operational at the beginning of the warranty period. Upon determination by the City that an item of work is defective, the City will notify BGE in writing, prior to the expiration of the Warranty Period, of the existence and extent of such defect, and shall establish a reasonable time for BGE to inspect, renew or repair the item of work. If BGE satisfactorily renews or repairs the item within the stipulated time period, the Warranty Period will be unaffected. If BGE fails to satisfactorily renew or repair the defective item within the stipulated time period, the Warranty Period shall be extended by the amount of time beyond the stipulated time period until the item is

fully and satisfactorily operational. The intent of this requirement is that the City receives full and satisfactory use of all items of work for the full Warranty Period.

Except as set forth in Section 14(h) above, all representations and warranties in this Section 14 will survive for the length of the Warranty Period, and will immediately thereafter terminate along with any associated right of indemnification and any associated remedies provided for in this Amendment.

15. Minority and Women's Business Opportunity Requirements. While the Parties acknowledge that the provisions of Article 5, Subtitle 28 of the Baltimore City Code do not apply to this Amendment because the work is being performed by BGE at its expense and no City funds are being expended, both the City and BGE acknowledge the importance of contractor diversity. BGE agrees that it shall make every good faith effort to equitably utilize the services of minority business enterprises ("MBE's") and women's business enterprises ("WBE's"). In identifying available MBE's and WBE's, BGE is encouraged to use the MBE/WBE Directory online at <https://baltimorecity.diversitycompliance.com/>. Notwithstanding anything in this Section 15, BGE shall continue to meet the diverse supplier goals set forth in its Memorandum of Understanding with the Public Service Commission.
16. Deletion of Specific Sections of the 2016 Settlement Agreement. The following provisions of the 2016 Settlement Agreement are hereby deleted in their entirety:
 - a. Section 6 (Billing)
 - b. Section 7 (True-up of Conduit System Rental Fees Paid by BGE)
 - c. Section 8 (Future Conduit System Rental Fee)

For avoidance of any doubt or misunderstanding, the Parties recognize that upon the expiration of the Initial Term or the Extended Term, as the case may be, this Amendment and the Settlement Agreement shall have been terminated except for any obligations surviving such termination.

17. Conflict of Terms. To the extent the provisions of this Amendment are inconsistent with the terms of the 2016 Settlement Agreement or to the "Current Agreements" to which the 2016 Settlement Agreement refers, the terms of this Amendment shall control. All other terms and conditions of the 2016 Settlement Agreement shall remain in full force and effect.
18. Binding Effect; Assignment. This Amendment shall be binding upon and shall inure to the benefit of the successors and permitted assigns of the Parties hereto. Neither Party shall assign any part of this Amendment without the prior written consent of the other Party, which may be withheld in such Party's sole discretion.

19. No Waiver. Unless otherwise stated in this Amendment, the Parties recognize, acknowledge, and agree that the failure by either Party to enforce any term of this Amendment shall not constitute a waiver of any rights or deprive either Party of the right to insist thereafter upon strict adherence to that or any other term of this Amendment, nor shall a waiver of any breach of this Amendment constitute a waiver of any proceeding or succeeding breach. No waiver of any of the provisions of this Amendment, unless expressly stated otherwise in this Amendment, shall be valid and binding unless it is in writing and signed by the Party against whom it is sought to be enforced.
20. Governing Law. The validity and construction of this Amendment or any of its terms or provisions shall be determined under the laws of the State of Maryland, regardless of any principles of conflicts of laws or choice of laws of any jurisdiction. The Parties further agree that the courts of the State of Maryland shall have exclusive jurisdiction to resolve disputes hereunder that may arise between the Parties.
21. Rules and Regulations. Subject to any limitations imposed by law or unless modified by this Amendment, BGE shall continue to abide by and adhere to the City's Rules and Regulations governing the use of the Conduit System, as amended from time to time, adopted pursuant to the Baltimore City Code. If BGE is not able to comply with any Rule or Regulation due to State or Federal law, BGE will give notice to the City and promptly confer with the City so that the Parties can make a good faith effort to address the City's concerns, as reflected in the new or amended Rule or Regulation, in a lawful manner.
22. Reservation of Rights. BGE reserves all rights and abilities that are necessary to its satisfactory compliance with any duties, requirements, obligations, or responsibilities that may exist under applicable law, including, but not limited to, any rule, regulation, or decision issued by the Commission. Notwithstanding anything in the foregoing to the contrary, BGE represents to the City that none of BGE's duties, requirements, obligations, or responsibilities under this Amendment are prohibited, conditioned, limited, or restricted by any applicable law any rule, regulation, or decision issued by the Commission, as such applicable law, rules, regulations, and decisions now stand. In this respect, BGE shall promptly advise the City of any proposed rule or regulation or pending case that could result in any rule, regulation, or decision that would prohibit condition, limit, or restrict BGE's duties, requirements, obligations, or responsibilities under this Amendment. Should any such rule, regulation, or decision frustrate the purpose of this Amendment or the ability of BGE to perform hereunder, the Parties agree to meet and confer in good faith on potential remedies and whether the City or BGE should be able to modify or terminate this Amendment, whereupon if no mutually acceptable accommodation or amendment is reached, the City may terminate this Amendment.
23. Conflicts of Interest. No member, official, representative, or employee of the City shall have any personal interest, direct or indirect, in this Amendment, nor shall any member, official, representative, or employee participate in any decision relating to this Amendment that affects such person's personal interest or the interests of any corporation, partnership, or association in which such person is, directly or indirectly, interested.

24. Interpretation. In the event of an ambiguity or question of intent or interpretation arises, this Amendment shall be construed as if drafted jointly by the Parties and no presumption or burden of proof shall arise favoring or disfavoring any Party by virtue of the authorship of any provisions of this Amendment. Whenever the word “including” is used in this Amendment, it shall be deemed to be followed by the words “without limitation.”
25. Severability. This Amendment shall be enforceable to the fullest extent allowed by law. If any provision of this Amendment shall be found to be null, unlawful, void, or inoperative for any reason, such provisions shall be struck from this Amendment and otherwise the Amendment shall continue in full force and effect.
26. Counterparts; Electronic Delivery. This Amendment may be executed in multiple counterparts, each of which when executed shall be deemed to be an original, but all of which together shall constitute one and the same agreement. Execution and delivery by facsimile or other electronic means shall be deemed to be, and shall have the same legal effect as, execution by an original signature and delivery in person.
27. Entire Agreement; Modification; Interpretation. This Amendment and the 2016 Settlement Agreement, together, with the “Current Agreements” to which the 2016 Settlement Agreement refers, constitute the entire agreement and understanding between the Parties and supersede all prior agreements, understandings, whether written or oral, relating to the subject matter of this Amendment. This Amendment may be amended or modified only by a written instrument executed by each Party and, in the case of the City, approved by its Board of Estimates. The language of all parts of this Amendment shall in all cases be construed as a whole, according to its fair meaning, and not strictly for or against either of the Parties, notwithstanding any statutory or common law provisions that would suggest otherwise.

[SIGNATURE PAGE FOLLOWS]

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, BGE and the City have caused this Amendment to Settlement Agreement to be executed by their respective officers as of the Effective Date.

WITNESS:



BALTIMORE GAS AND ELECTRIC COMPANY

By: 

Name: David M. Vahos

Title: Chief Financial Officer, BGE

Date: _____

[SEAL]
ATTEST:

Custodian of the City Seal

MAYOR AND CITY COUNCIL OF BALTIMORE

By: 

Name: Brandon Scott

Title: Mayor

APPROVED FOR FORM AND LEGAL SUFFICIENCY

Name: _____

Title: _____

APPROVED BY THE BOARD OF ESTIMATES

Deputy Controller

Date: _____

THE BALTIMORE BANNER

Baltimore's 19th-century underground pipes are literally bursting into flames

Hayes Gardner and Emily Opilo

7/18/2025 5:30 a.m. EDT



The site of the June 28 underground fire as seen on the morning of July 2. South Street was still closed, and busy Baltimore Street was restricted to one lane. (Emily Opilo/The Baltimore Banner)

But who will prevent them? BGE and the city point fingers

Cables carrying electricity and information — the hidden lifeblood of Baltimore — thread through hundreds of miles of terracotta tubes so old that PVC pipes hadn't been invented when they were buried below the city streets.

Those clay conduits keep [catching fire](#), sometimes exploding and turning [323-pound manhole covers](#) into dangerous projectiles.

There's no consensus as to why. And there's no clear answer as to whose responsibility it is to prevent it from happening again.

A variety of underground stakeholders operate in and around the city-owned conduit, leaving each one pointing fingers and looking at others for answers. The City Council has scheduled a hearing Tuesday, its [second on the issue in a year](#).

"Everybody is cagey because no one wants to take responsibility," said Councilman Mark Conway, who called for the hearing. "There's a lot of infrastructure down there. ... There's so many things that could go wrong."

These kinds of fires have been occurring for a century. But the pace is picking up, and the concentration is noticeable:

Eight times in roughly two years, underground forces like fires have blown off manhole covers. Three of those

incidents occurred in a small slice of downtown Baltimore, including the [most recent one, on June 28](#).

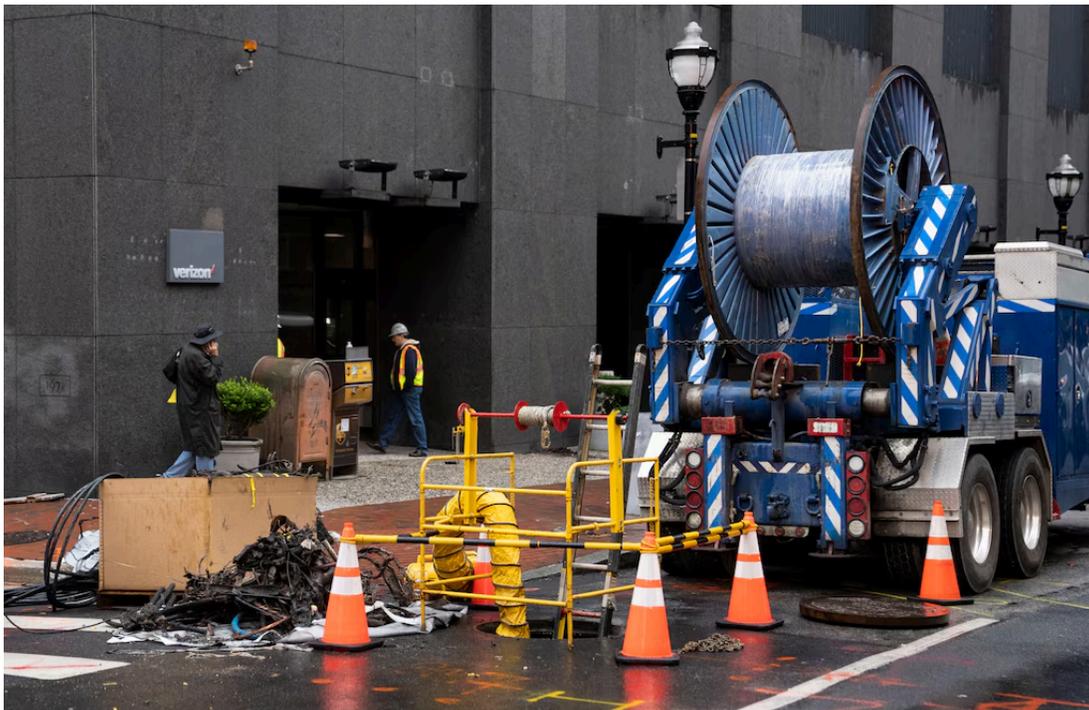
A 2023 agreement between the city and the region's utility and primary conduit user, Baltimore Gas and Electric, has muddled the issue of responsibility.

One especially explosive inferno in September on Charles Street swallowed up a bookstore, caused over \$300,000 in damage and left 2,000 people without power, according to a report BGE filed to state regulators.

That fire prompted four separate studies. Still, eight months later, it is uncertain what caused it. BGE has a theory — but hastens to add that it doesn't believe it should be the primary investigator.

Months after the September blast, Mayor Brandon Scott's office sought a third-party investigator to help. As they searched, another explosion occurred, and the city hired RTI Consulting as the investigator of both of those blazes.

Both Baltimore and BGE, which occupies 75% of the conduit, generally blame the fires on brittle infrastructure dating to the 19th century, which would require an extraordinary investment to entirely replace. But age alone doesn't explain a surprising string of fires, experts say.



BGE workers on North Charles Street in Baltimore in September 2024, days after a massive fire caused over \$300,000 in damage. (Jessica Gallagher/The Baltimore Banner)



Cords running from an open manhole cover on North Charles Street in September 2024. (Jessica Gallagher/The Baltimore Banner)

Environmental factors can alter subterranean conditions. And Baltimore's underground is crowded with pipes full of steam, natural gas or water, which could pose problems for the adjacent conduit. Within it, older cables are often encased with a plastic coating that can decompose, producing flammable gases and exposed wires.

It's an underworld that operates unseen — until it erupts.

Competing theories

The city has always owned the conduit, and it charges tenants, including BGE and Comcast, to use it. That makes Baltimore atypical. In other cities, including Philadelphia and New York, a utility owns the system.

BGE unsuccessfully sought to purchase Baltimore's conduit for \$100 million in 2015, a move that would have allowed the company to charge other users for access.

Bernard C. "Jack" Young, then the City Council president, felt that BGE low-balled the city, and was never a fan of selling the conduit, anyway. He later helped usher in a [charter amendment, approved in 2022](#), that permanently prohibited its sale.

Months later, Scott's office and BGE reached an agreement on a [controversial new deal](#) that wasn't a sale, but still yielded some power and responsibility to the utility.

The city remained on the hook for the conduit's maintenance, but BGE largely took over capital improvements, allowing it to determine how revenue generated by the conduit was spent to improve the infrastructure.

Since the agreement was signed, Baltimore's Conduit Division has been slashed from 100 employees in 2022 to 58 today, although city transportation officials argue that the cuts have not affected conduit maintenance.



A manhole cover that was shattered by the force of the underground fire that city fire crews extinguished in Mount Vernon in September. (Baltimore City Fire Department)

The city does not perform routine conduit inspections, rather only upon request. Asked about the notorious area around Charles Street downtown, the city said it has conducted roughly 160 inspections there in the past two years.

Jonas Poggi, a spokesperson for Scott, said in a statement that the city has a “significant responsibility” to ensure the conduit’s safety, but added that there are

“numerous users of the conduit who are responsible for their utilities underground.”

BGE spokesperson Nick Alexopoulos said in a statement that BGE has found its equipment to be “in good working condition,” emphasizing that other utilities, like water and steam, are nearby.

Vicinity Energy, the steam line’s owner, did not respond to requests for comment.

Alexopoulos also played down BGE’s role in capital improvements. The city is “ultimately responsible for the condition of the system,” he said, adding that Baltimore is free to make capital improvements, too.

Comcast spokesperson Kristie Fox said the company will “continue to support BGE and the City’s efforts to identify the root cause of the recent fires.” Another telecom company that uses the conduit, Crown Castle, did not reply to requests for comment.

The city’s continued ownership of the conduit was a crucial aspect of BGE’s analysis into September’s fire. BGE said the city — which “owns, maintains and manages the conduit system” — is solely responsible for investigating the incident. As a tenant, BGE said, it would not lead a formal investigation.



BGE has a theory about the fires, but hastens to add that it doesn't believe it should be the primary investigator. (Ulysses Muñoz/The Baltimore Banner)

That didn't stop the company from forming a supposition: The city's trenching work to replace water lines the year prior "likely caused the conduit to collapse," leading to damaged cable insulation and, eventually, the fire.

The Scott administration disputes BGE's findings. His office said a city investigation found that the city's "construction activity did not contribute to the fire."

The cause of the most recent fire is still under investigation, but BGE "strongly suspects" that other underground facilities "may have been a causative factor," Alexopoulos said.

BGE also said that a January 2024 fire on Charles Street "may" have been due to a damaged section of conduit,

and indicated that it could do a better job than the city of caring for the buried infrastructure. These incidents “simply do not occur” in areas where “BGE owns and maintains the conduit system,” the company said.

Underground fires and manhole explosions happen in other large cities, too, including [Washington](#), Philadelphia and [New York City](#). But they became enough of a problem locally that, in 2023, the Maryland Public Service Commission required utilities to list them in annual reports.

Manhole covers have exploded in eight Baltimore locations since 2023

In the past roughly two years, underground forces like fires have blown off manhole covers in Baltimore City. Three of those, including one on June 28 (highlighted in orange), happened in a small slice of downtown.

© OpenStreetMap contributors

Commission reports show that eight times since January 2023, Baltimore's manhole covers have been lifted, either by blazes or other underground pressure. The state has only seen one such instance elsewhere, in Harford County in 2024.

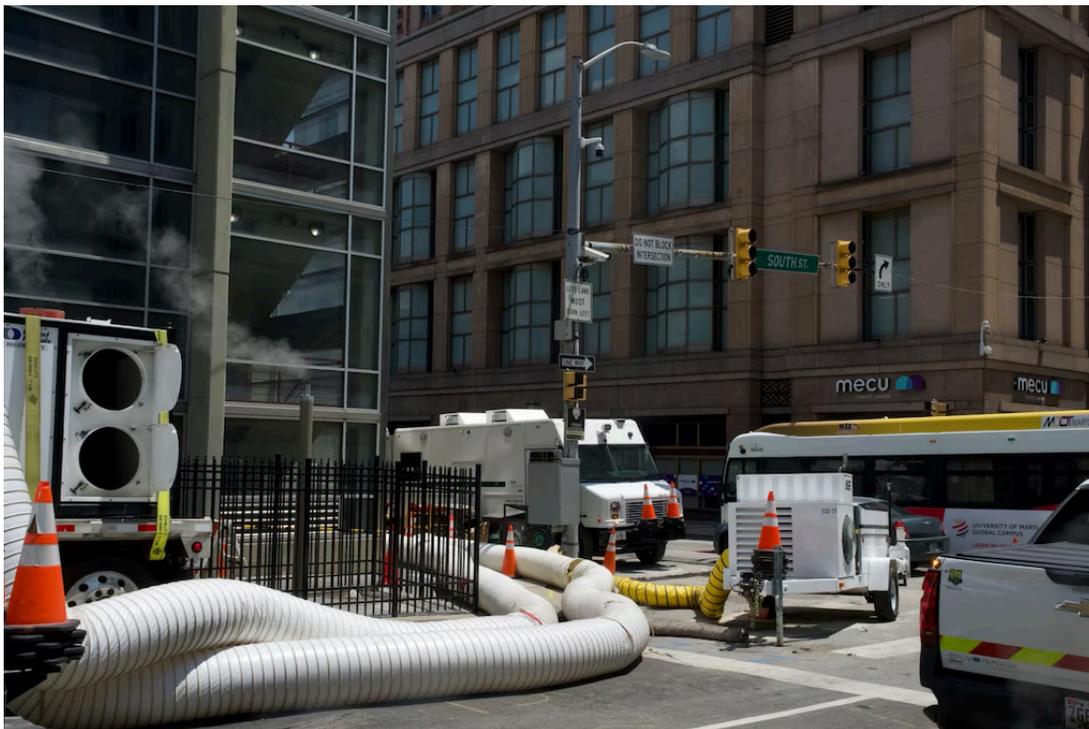
City officials said there have been about 15 underground fires in that time.

After Baltimore's headline-making Charles Street fire last year, Scott announced he would convene a workgroup including conduit stakeholders. They met once in October, Scott's office said, but not again since.

Missed by millimeters

Two weeks after the most recent underground fire, a block from City Hall, the area still resembled an active construction site.

A BGE worker submerged in a manhole navigated a hefty spaghetti of cables as crews continued repair work on the 300 block of Baltimore Street. Three lanes of traffic gridlocked into one.



BGE crews work at the intersection of South and East Baltimore streets on July 11. Two weeks earlier, an underground fire on the 300 block of East Baltimore Street caused road closures and outages. (Kaitlin Newman/The Baltimore Banner)

Elisa Milan, owner of The Empanada Lady, surveyed the hard hats and utility trucks as she considered lost revenues due to decreased foot traffic. The fire caused the Puerto Rican restaurant to lose internet access for 12 days, complicating business. Employees could not access the cash drawer and had to track employee hours and tips manually, Milan said. Even basic functions, like playing music, were a challenge.

Service was restored after Milan filed a complaint against Comcast with the Federal Communications Commission, she said. Comcast said the delay in service restoration was due to inability to access nearby manholes following the fire.

When the conduit caught fire, staff and customers were warned by authorities to remain inside. The underground blazes can build up energy and launch manhole covers into the air, like missiles, with the force of a dozen [sticks of dynamite](#).

Milan said she is “absolutely concerned” about the consequences of another incident.

“We walk on manholes every day,” she said.

When a manhole cover shattered Gian Marco Menswear’s windows on Charles Street a few years ago, owner Marc Sklar said it missed an employee “by millimeters.”

A popular Irish pub, [Mick O’Shea’s](#), closed for weeks after September’s explosion. A handwritten note on its

door explained that its closure was “due to the fact that the powers that be failed to maintain the infrastructure.”

The stage for such disasters was set in the 1890s.



Men dig a ditch for wire conduit on the north side of St Martin's Road during the Roland Park Company's development of the Guilford neighborhood of Baltimore in the early 1900s. (Maryland Center for History and Culture)

Overhead telegraph and telephone wires congested city streets, so Baltimore officials decided to bury them within a “subway for wires,” as Baltimore Sun articles described it at the time. (Thankfully, the city opted for terracotta instead of treated wood, which was also considered as a cheaper option.)

The 741-mile conduit system, accessed via 12,000 manholes, can range from two feet deep to 20 feet deep. The ducts that carry cables in the conduit can barely fit a softball.

The system is today made of about [80% terracotta or orangeburg](#), another outdated piping, encased in concrete. The rest has been Band-Aided over the years and modernized using PVC pipe.

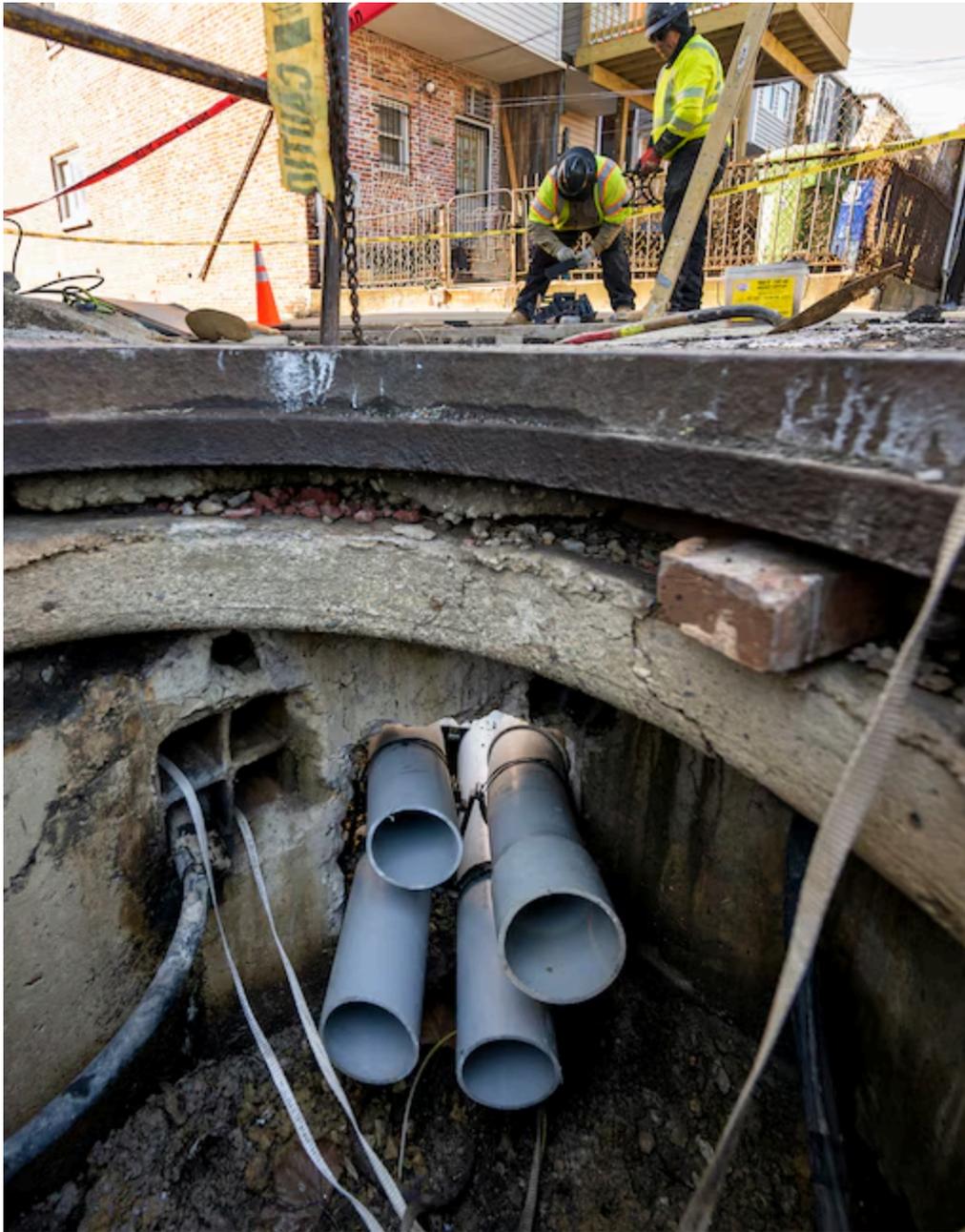
“A lot of it is not in good shape,” said Ernest George, who retired as a city conduit inspection supervisor last year.

On a recent walk downtown, George recounted his 38 years with the Conduit Division. He once narrowly avoided injury when a manhole exploded near him.

He’s seen firsthand just how crowded Baltimore’s basement is. “Something’s gonna give,” George said.

Asked who can prevent future underground explosions, he thought of a higher power.

“God, that’s who has control,” he said.



Workers perform conduit work in Clifton Park in January 2024. The bulk of the city's conduit is made of outdated materials like terracotta (the four cubes on the left) while some has been modernized with PVC pipes. (BGE)



Ernest George, who worked for the city's Conduit Division for 38 years, points to one of 12,000 manholes within Baltimore's conduit system. (Hayes Gardner/The Baltimore Banner)

'A lot of things all around, entangled'

After the September fire, Scott was asked if he could confidently say that the Charles Street area was safe. Shying away from predictions, Scott said that although

he is the mayor, he is not the omniscient “Great Wizard of Oz.”

“I can’t say that another fire isn’t going to happen,” he said.

Another downtown explosion came. And more are likely to follow.

Baltimore’s underground is especially busy downtown, where there is a concentration of buildings.

“In a big, heavily dense city, you do have a lot of things all around, entangled, and interconnected physically with electrical,” said Rae Zimmerman, a New York University professor who studies underground infrastructure resilience.

External factors, like water and salt, can damage underground infrastructure. Moisture can creep into conduits and cause deterioration of the plastic coating of old cables. That decomposition can create a “smoldering” fire event, said Bill Koffel, a University of Maryland professor of fire protection engineering.

Steam — much of which comes from the trash incinerator — heats many buildings downtown, as evidenced by clouds of it that noticeably escape from the ground. It generates heat and moisture, which can cause conduit problems, Koffel said.



Continuing work at the intersection of South and East Baltimore streets last week after an underground fire in June. (Kaitlin Newman/The Baltimore Banner)

Natural gas and steam could be contributing factors to fires that cause manhole cover explosions, said Chuck Hookham, an engineering consultant.

“That’s where I would look first,” he said.

BGE has said it has “no records indicating natural gas” was present at recent manhole fires.

As if there’s not enough going on underground, conduit pirates also strike.

In some cases, unauthorized users prop open manhole covers to access the conduit without paying, city transportation officials said. (The city considered placing locks on covers in 2017, but decided that would complicate 24-hour access.)

Illicit access can cause overcrowding. Zimmerman stressed the importance of tracking inventory — knowing exactly what is in every inch underground.

Like it or not, underground fires are a Baltimore staple, predating, even, Old Bay spice.

The very first one on record?

In 1922, a manhole cover blew, nearly injuring several Goucher College students on, you guessed it, Charles Street.

Baltimore Banner reporter Tim Prudente contributed to this article.