

# State, Citing Blast, Tells Con Ed to Fix Gas Leaks

The Public Service Commission ordered the Consolidated Edison Company yesterday to reduce "the ever-present hazard" of underground explosions by setting up a more effective system of detecting and repairing natural-gas leaks.

The order grew out of a P.S.C. investigation of a gas-leak explosion on Delancey Street on Jan. 3, 1969. One person was injured in the blast, and 300 families were forced out of their apartments for almost 24 hours. Traffic on the Williamsburg Bridge had to be cut off, as was service on segments on the IND and BMT subway lines.

The explosion, which lifted 40-to-100-foot sections of the street, occurred after gas collected in an unused utility tunnel that ran for four blocks on the north side of Delancey Street.

The P.S.C. said yesterday that "there is every reason to believe" there are "many other" such tunnel-like structures under the streets of Manhattan.

## 'Ever-Present Hazard'

The staff report on which the commission's order was based does not contain a count of the tunnels. But it notes that "there is an ever-present hazard that one or more of these tunnels will be the receptacle for the accumulation of natural gas that may leak from Con Edison's system."

"The only practical way to deal with this problem," the report continued, "is for Con Edison to have an effective leakage survey and repair program."

The P.S.C. said the possibility of explosions was compounded by the number of old gas mains, many of them unused, running parallel to each other in lower Manhattan.

They are relics of the last century, according to a commission spokesman, when scores of gas companies—most of them long since absorbed into Con Ed—were competing with each other.

This "confused system of piping," the P.S.C. said, made it difficult for Con Ed to cut off the flow of gas to the site of the Delancey Street blast.

"It took about 14 hours to

completely shut off the gas feeding the fire," the Public Service Commission said. "In other words, every main in the immediate area had to be considered suspect in determining the location of the various points of leakage feeding the fire, and the gas flow in each main in the immediate vicinity had to be shut off."

The commission asserted that Con Ed had failed "to expedite a program designed to enable it to react swiftly in emergencies," and ordered the company to take measures "to facilitate the rapid emergency shut-off of small sections" of the gas system, particularly in Manhattan.

The commission also ordered Con Ed to submit for its approval a "program of main simplification in the Borough of Manhattan." It declared that the problem of too much pipe is "far worse" in Manhattan than elsewhere in the city.

In all, the commission continued, there are about six-million feet of main underground in Manhattan—a figure that is more than double the 2.7 million feet of streets.

In the Bronx, by comparison, there is apparently a parity—4.3 million feet of street to about the same amount of main.

## Company Taking Readings

A Consolidated Edison spokesman said the company had not received the P.S.C. order and therefore could not comment on it.

He noted, however, that Con Ed, in conjunction with Public Service Commission staff members, was taking readings of gas concentrations in the Delancey Street area and so far had found "no significant accumulations."

The utility tunnel in which the Delancey Street explosion occurred collapsed in the blast and has since been filled in by the city, according to Transportation Administrator Constantine Sidamon-Eristoff.

It and a companion tunnel on the south side of the street were apparently built at about the turn of the century. Made of 12-to-16-inch concrete, the tunnels are about 9 to 11 feet wide and 7 feet high.

## Railroad Track in One

The remaining tunnel still has some narrow gauge railroad track in it. Mr. Sidamon-Eristoff said yesterday that he thought the tunnels had been built to help in the disposal of rock from subway excavations.

He said the tunnel "made for a dangerous situation" and that "it ought to be filled in." The Transportation Administrator added that it "was a question of whether the city or Con Ed was responsible." A Con Ed spokesman said that statement was debatable. The tunnel, he contended, "is city property."