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PCB-laced oil leaks on street

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PACIFICA — A PG&E transformer exploded and leaked about 12 gallons of PCB-contaminated oil onto the area below it in the 1500 block of Linda Mar Boulevard Tuesday, leaving at least one angry resident wondering why it took the utility's personnel so long to respond.

The transformer began spouting smoke at about 11:20 a.m. and a PG&E troubleshooter arrived at the scene at 12:35 p.m., seconds after the transformer went off with a series of popping noises and showered a yard and a car under it with the polychlorinated biphenyl, according to Mrs. Jean Foster, who saw it all from her home at 1560 Linda Mar.

Mrs. Foster said it was she who first called PG&E at 11:20. She also asked if she should call the city's Fire Department and said she was reportedly told: "You can if you want to." She did.

Laboratory testing by PG&E on some of the spilled oil confirmed by 6:30 p.m. that it contained the highly toxic PCB and a crew went to work to clean it up, according to PG&E spokeswoman Faith Kramer.

Pacifica police, called to the scene at 10:30 p.m., said the PG&E workers had already cleaned up a vehicle and the sidewalk and street of contamination and were preparing to remove the soil in a residential yard under the transformer.

Officers said they assisted with security of the area, but

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PCB leak

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that the utility workers were there through the night.

But to Mrs. Foster, the whole episode appeared to be one of missed communications and slow response.

"I was told by a district manager that if there had been a shorter response time this would not have happened," she said.

She added she was told the electrical circuits to the 12,000-kilovolt transformer would have been turned off and what she described as "arcing, popping and puffing" could have been avoided.

The PG&E executive also had said there would be an investigation into the delay in response, she reported.

The transformer explosion, though not terribly loud, "sounded about like four M-80s (a type of fireworks) going off at once," Mrs. Foster recounted.

The cloud of smoke completely enveloped the William Sugrue Jr. family home across the street at 1559 Linda Mar and partially covered the one next to it, she said.

The utility pole on which the transformer was mounted is on the property line of the Sugrue home and a neighbor's.

Mrs. Foster said her son Stephen's 1970 Ford Torino was showered by the PCB and may be ruined.

"We can't get to it because it's still cordoned off," she said this morning, "but regardless of its condition I'm not going to let him drive it."

Stephen had bought the car recently with the idea of refurbishing it so that it could be re-sold.

That idea is apparently dead now, Mrs. Foster said.

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Why Pacifica police were not notified is a mystery to her, she said.

Stephen had gone to the public phone at a nearby Safeway store "because mine was tied up," and met a police officer there, who passed the word, she said.