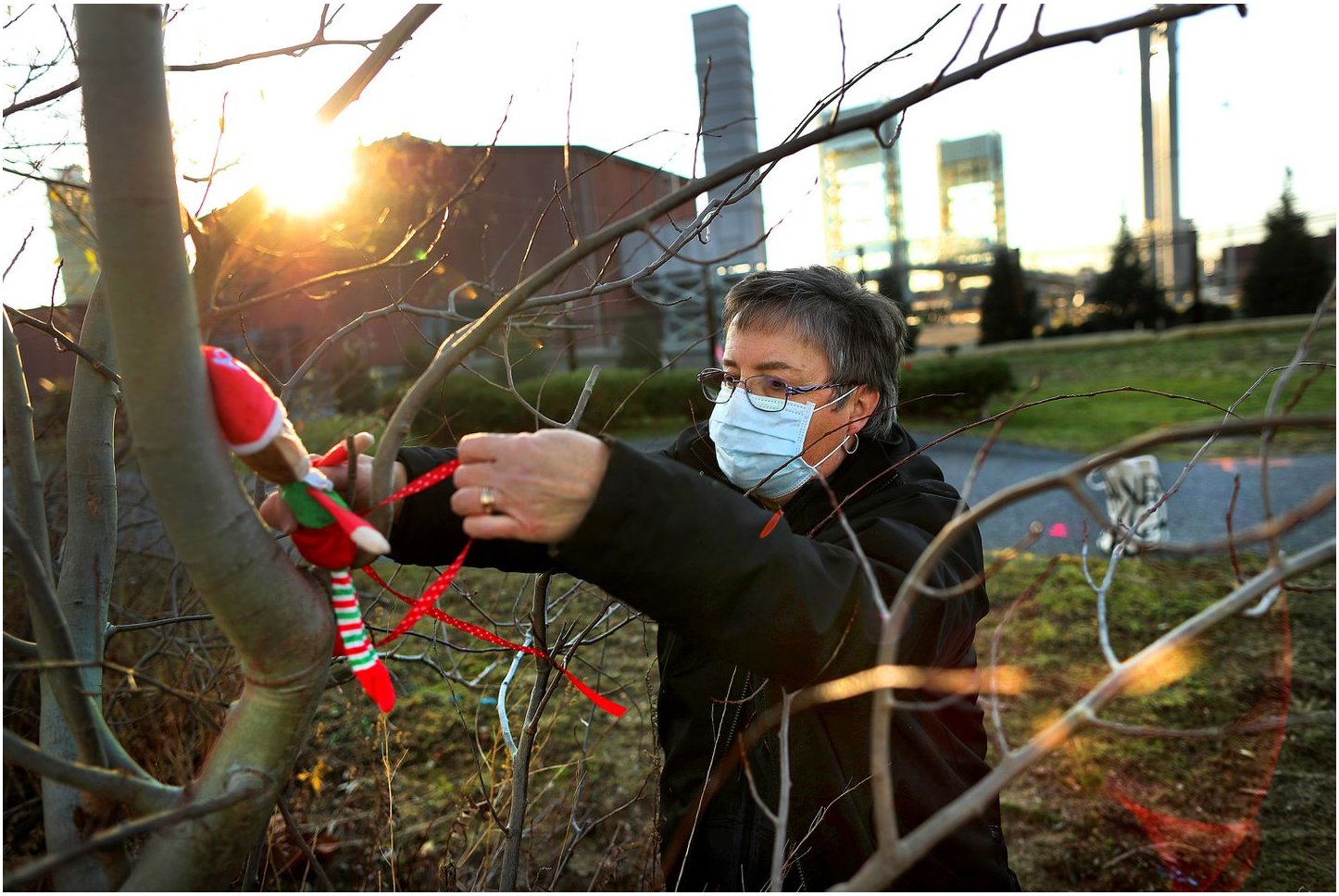
SPOTLIGHT INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM FELLOWSHIP

In Weymouth, a brute lesson in power politics

A Globe investigation finds residents who fought a six-year battle with an energy giant over a controversial gas compressor never had much of a chance, with both the federal and state governments consistently ruling against them

By **Mike Stanton** Boston Globe Spotlight Fellow, Updated December 12, 2020, 1:58 p.m.



As the new gas pipeline compressor station (in background) is set to start operating this week, citizen activist Alice Arena places an elf on a tree in Kings Cove Park in Weymouth. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

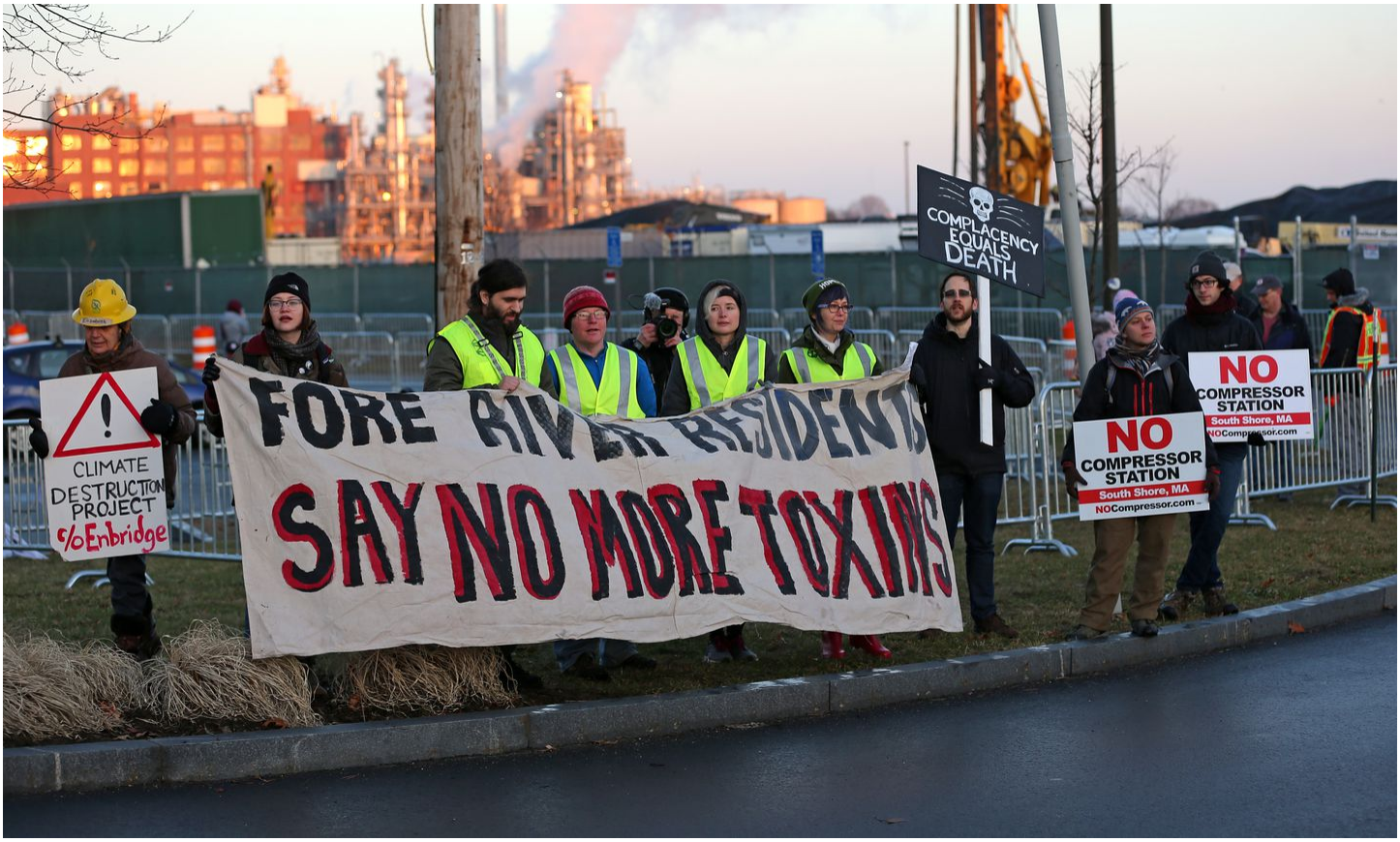
WEYMOUTH — Alice Arena was sitting at the kitchen table in her Colonial home at the end of September, composing yet another e-mail to government regulators, when her phone erupted with a flurry of calls and texts.

“What’s this? They had another accident?” read one message.

For six years, Arena has battled federal regulators and Governor Charlie Baker's administration to stop one of North America's biggest pipeline companies from constructing a natural gas compressor station in her South Shore neighborhood. The 7,700-horsepower compressor would pump gas under high pressure to speed it on its journey north, as far away as Nova Scotia.

This has been an epic battle over a crucial piece of the natural gas energy system — featuring a hunger strike, lawsuits, arrests, and big money lobbyists. The battle was especially fierce in Weymouth, both because of its history of pollution and its dense population — and also because Massachusetts has seen the tragedy that can come when natural gas pipelines fail: the Merrimack Valley explosions of 2018.

That hazard — as well as fears of cancer-causing pollutants — has mobilized Arena and her citizens group, one of the longest-running in the state opposing a major energy project.



A group of protesters convened at the Weymouth compressor station last January. Several were arrested that day for blocking the construction site. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

"They are trying to plant a time bomb in our neighborhood," one resident warned at a public hearing.

The day after that flurry of texts, a copy of a government order dropped into Arena's e-mail, bringing her guarded excitement. Federal regulators cited two emergency shutdowns at the station that had occurred in the past few weeks. They ordered an indefinite delay to its planned startup Oct. 1, pending a safety review.

Arena knew better than to get too hopeful — so often her group's victories had been followed by setbacks. And that would be the case again.

The day before Thanksgiving, after an eight-week review, federal investigators said that the $100 million station could safely begin work, pumping up to 57.5 million cubic feet of gas a day and pressurizing it to 1,440 pounds per square inch through high-strength carbon steel pipes. After running tests over the past week, operators are hoping to start running the compressor this week.

Nearly 1,000 homes, along with nursing homes and schools, are within a one-mile radius of the gas compressor station. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

But Arena does not see this as the end. Legal appeals are still pending, and she believes new troubles could surface at the station to cause another shutdown — one her group hopes would become permanent.

She's not afraid of a fight, and lives by a favorite quote from the early 20th-century progressive organizer Mother Jones — "Pray for the dead and fight like hell for the living."

* * *

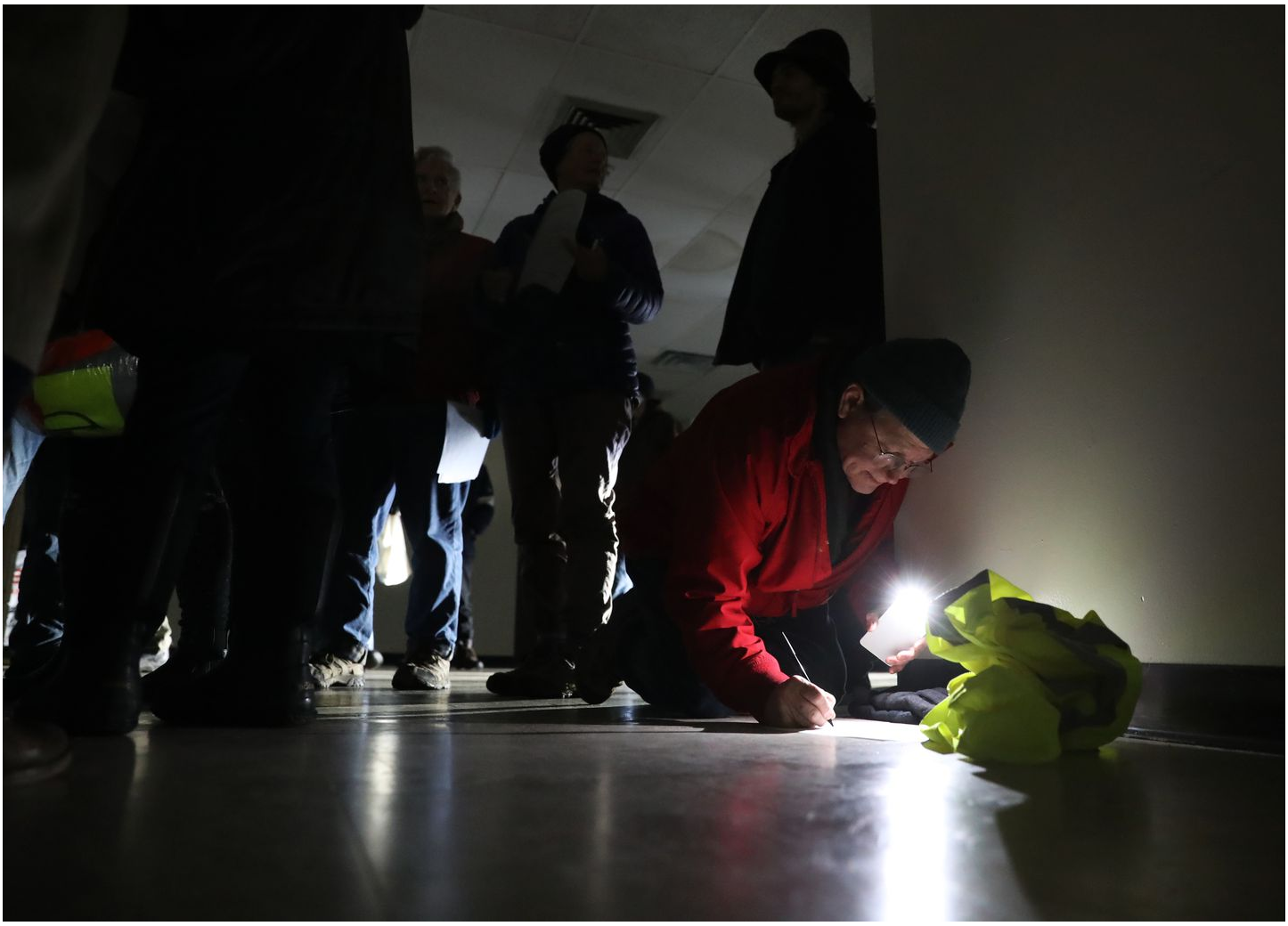
Even as Arena and her allies gear up to keep fighting, they know they are running out of options.

A Globe investigation of government actions leading up to this point shows the political deck has long been stacked against citizen groups like Arena's. Community input is often overridden by the interests of pipeline owners and government regulators.

From 1999 to 2017, an independent study found, the federal agency that issues permits for new pipelines had approved 400 projects and declined just two. The commission has also rejected calls to weigh the impact of new pipelines on climate change. And under President Trump, the federal government has sought to speed up approvals for new pipelines.

If federal regulators offered little hope, Arena's group looked to Governor Baker, who routinely touts his green credentials. His administration had power over the project because state air and water permits were required.

But the citizens group would be disappointed time and time again.



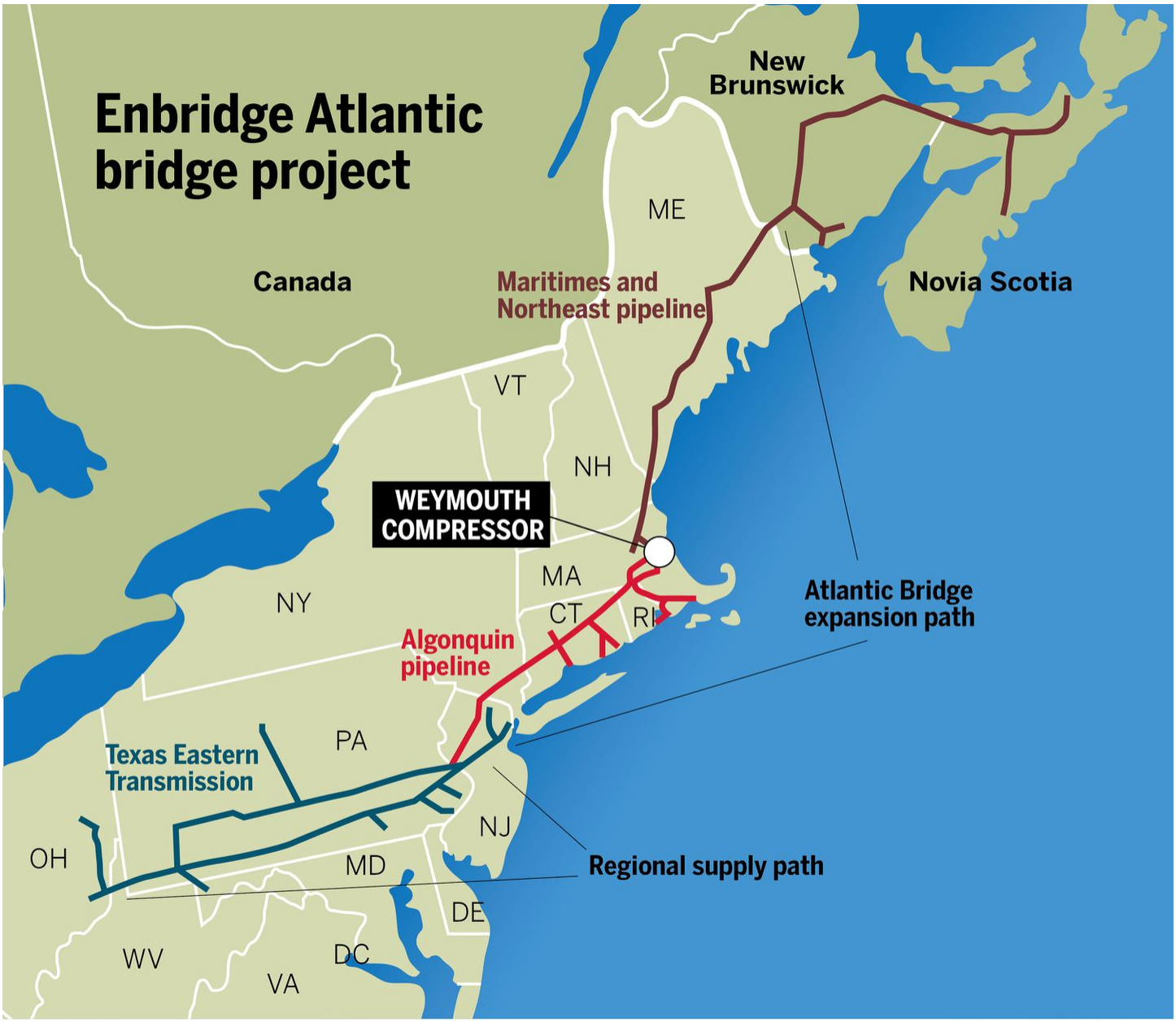
Protesters met in the early-morning darkness at an empty business in January prior to blocking the construction site of the compressor. David Klafter of Brookline used the light from his cellphone as he wrote down information in case he was arrested. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

Baker's spokespeople tell the Globe he authorized extensive state reviews of the project, but that the federal government holds the power to approve new pipelines. Besides, Baker says, bringing new gas into Massachusetts is a key part of his energy agenda, along with wind and hydropower, to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from dirtier coal and oil.

Proponents call gas, which supplies half of Massachusetts' energy needs, the "bridge fuel" to a green future. But state utilities regulators launched an investigation this fall of future demand amid concerns that more pipelines and more gas will bring more methane pollution, a much more potent greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide.

Enbridge, the Canadian pipeline giant, built the Weymouth compressor as the linchpin of its $600 million Atlantic Bridge project to transport 133 million cubic feet a day on the company's Algonquin Pipeline from New Jersey to Massachusetts. Industry officials say the added capacity is necessary to guarantee reliability on cold winter days.

But to Arena, the bridge leads to Canada. The Weymouth compressor will push gas through a pipeline beneath Boston Harbor then north to Enbridge's Maritimes & Northeast Pipeline that runs through Maine to Nova Scotia. The vast majority of the Atlantic Bridge gas will go to Canada, according to federal records.



SOURCE: Enbridge

H. HOPP-BRUCE/GLOBE STAFF

HEATHER HOPP-BRUCE

For plant opponents, this wasn't about nimbyism; it was about an area long saddled with environmental burdens saying it had had enough.

For more than a century, the Fore River Basin encompassing Weymouth, Quincy, and Braintree had been an industrial powerhouse, producing US warships for two world wars. Left behind was a legacy of pollution and heightened disease rates that, as with the impact of COVID-19, underscore the disproportionate burden that blue-collar and minority communities bear.

The question of locating more gas facilities in populated areas was clearly an issue when state officials conducted a study on the health impact of the compressor. An early draft of the report, obtained by the Globe, concluded that the Weymouth compressor presented an opportunity to consider the "public health implications" of continued investments in gas — and "to integrate more health-protective considerations" into permitting gas facilities.

But that paragraph was deleted from the final report.

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Alice Arena had just settled into her seat for the January 2015 meeting of the Weymouth Town Council when someone announced upcoming events. A spaghetti supper. A school fund-raiser. An open house at the Elks Lodge about a proposed new gas project in town. Her ears perked up.

Early this month, Alice Arena surveyed the completed compressor station from the top of the Fore River Bridge. Members of her group, the Fore River Residents Against the Compressor Station (FRRACS), have been protesting for the past six years. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

Arena, 62, is an unassuming woman with close-cropped, steel-gray hair and eyes that twinkle behind wire-rimmed glasses. She has been a corporate accountant, a massage therapist, and a political organizer in the town where she has lived for 26 years and where she and her husband raised their two children — someone who immerses herself in local causes and politics.

A friend at a South Shore Democratic caucus meeting had recently mentioned he'd heard of a plan to build a natural gas compressor station in town. "It could be a big environmental problem," he warned.

Arena had never heard of compressors. But when she went home and started reading about them, she grew alarmed. There have been incidents, rare but frightening, of fires and explosions, as well as more frequent "blowdowns" to relieve pressure in the lines by venting gas into the air.

“A timebomb in our neighborhood”

Enbridge's new natural gas compressor in Weymouth, Mass., sits at the intersection of four densely populated neighborhoods and is within a mile of at least nine industrial facilities and 11 parks and beaches. * indicates one-mile radius around the compressor. Click/touch the locations below for more details.

Source: Greater Boston Physicians for Social Responsibility, Neighborhood Scout

She read about one scary blowdown in 2013 at a compressor in rural Searsmont, Maine, owned by the same company that wanted to build one in Weymouth. An ice blockage jammed a valve on New Year’s Eve, necessitating a blowdown that sounded like the roar of a jet plane and panicked residents. The company was fined $34,500 for failing to report the release of 70 million cubic feet of gas.

Arena told Rebecca Haugh, the North Weymouth town councilor, about her worries. Haugh had recently attended a meeting at Town Hall with the mayor and representatives of the pipeline company, Spectra Energy. (Spectra, based in Houston, would be bought the following year by Enbridge.) As Haugh recalls, one of the men from Spectra said the compressor station was like a big shed — “You won’t even notice it’s there.”

Haugh asked if she could tour one of Spectra’s compressor stations in Connecticut. The tour, she says, was “an eye-opening experience.” As soon as she parked, she could smell the rotten-egg smell and hear the jet-engine whine from the turbines. Spectra gave her earplugs.

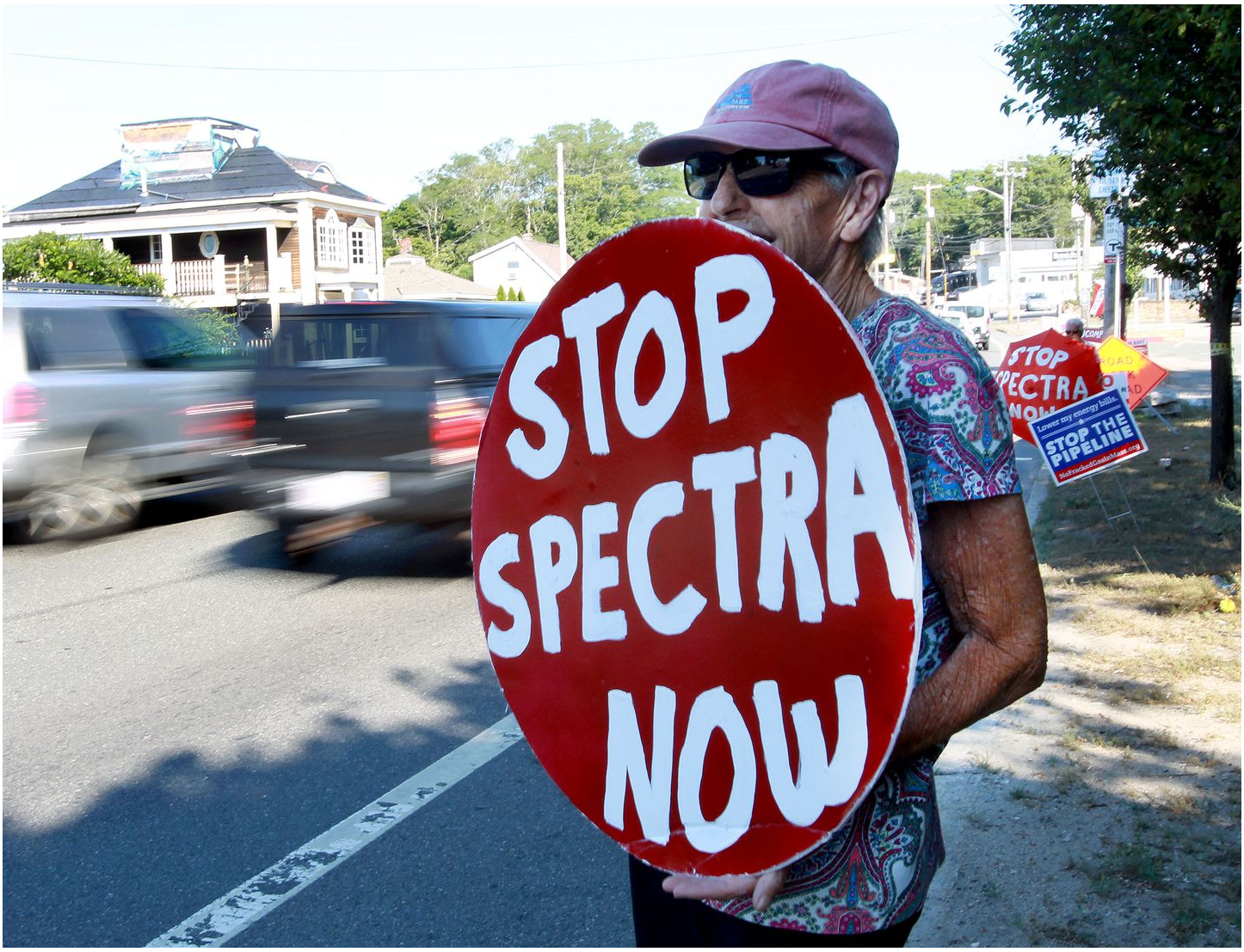
The compressor was also much bigger than a shed — a sprawling two-story building.

On her way home, Haugh drove by two other Spectra compressors, in Connecticut and Rhode Island, both in rural areas. It “boggled my mind,” she said, that Spectra wanted to build one in her densely populated district, near schools, nursing homes, and nearly 1,000 homes.

Haugh joined Arena in opposing the compressor. Arena, meanwhile, had gone into organizing mode. She made fliers, attended Spectra’s open house at the Elks Lodge, and recruited friends and neighbors. With a nod to the process of fracking that had

opened up vast reserves of gas in Pennsylvania now headed their way, she named the citizens group Fore River Residents Against the Compressor Station, FRRACS.

The group would grow into a tenacious coalition of neighbors and ministers, doctors and lawyers, scientists and environmentalists, students and retirees. That spring, they helped fill the auditorium at the Abigail Adams Middle School for a public hearing conducted by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission. But while the commission must seek residents' input, its power to ignore them was evident that night when an agency staffer interrupted the first speaker, Mayor Sue Kay, after three minutes.



Dotty Anderson of Weymouth joined protesters along the roadway off the Fore River Bridge in the summer of 2016. JOHN BLANDING/GLOBE STAFF

"When they cut off the mayor, I realized these people don't want to hear us," said state Senator Patrick O'Connor, then a town councilor. "It was rubber stamped from the get go."

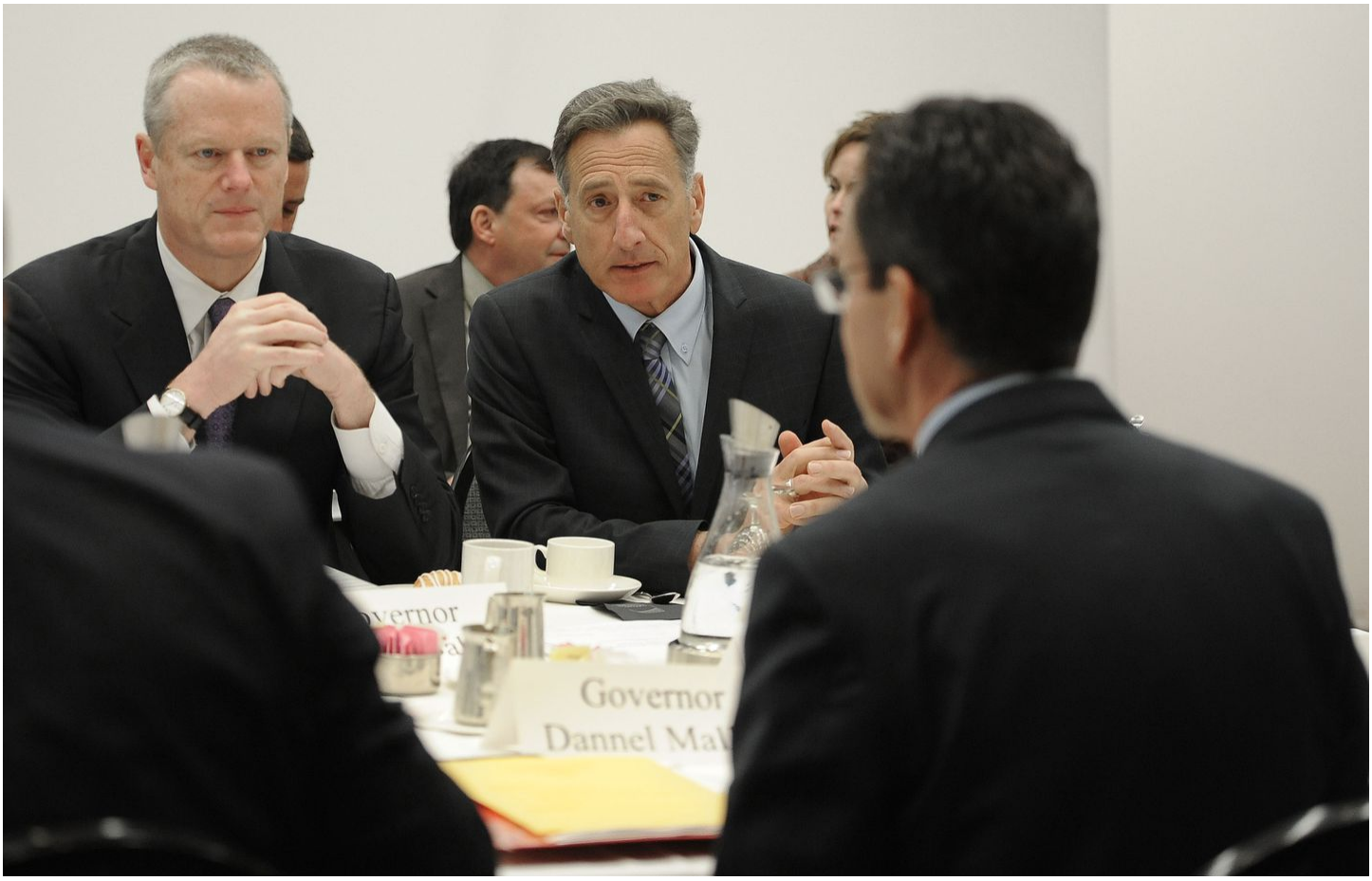
Looking back, Haugh recalled, "We were so naïve back then. You really think they're going to listen. . . . I thought I'd be working on planting trees and beautifying the park next to the bridge. I didn't think I'd be fighting a Fortune 100 company."

* * *

Arena, Haugh, and the people of Weymouth quickly came to realize their community was a piece in a larger energy jigsaw puzzle.

Thanks to fracking, natural gas had become cheap and plentiful, transforming the US into a leading global gas exporter.

Scientists, however, were discovering that while coal and oil produce more carbon dioxide, gas pipelines and compressors put more methane than previously known into the atmosphere. And the gas is laced with the cancer-causing chemicals used in fracking.



Governor Charlie Baker (left) met with other New England governors in 2015 regarding the region's long-term energy strategy. He was joined by Vermont Governor Peter Shumlin (center) and Connecticut Governor Dannel P. Malloy. JESSICA HILL

The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, which approves new pipelines, was the target of growing unrest among antipipeline activists. But the agency's chair, Cheryl LaFleur, said in a speech at the National Press Club in Washington that America needed more gas pipelines.

"Some people just don't want it going through their town," she said during the same week of the 2015 Elks Lodge hearing in Weymouth. "We definitely can't please everyone."

Shortly after LaFleur's speech, the new governor of Massachusetts, Baker, told a business group at the Boston Harbor Hotel that New England needed more gas pipelines to meet the region's growing demand and keep energy costs from spiking in winter as older oil and coal plants were retired. He applauded Spectra's efforts to expand its Algonquin Pipeline.

"We can't go through this issue every winter where the price of electricity goes up 30 or 40 percent," said Baker.

But Representative Stephen Lynch of Boston was so frustrated fighting Spectra projects in West Roxbury and Weymouth that he introduced an amendment in Congress in 2015 to give states more of a say by requiring a state-level safety review of high-risk gas projects. Lynch's amendment died after a Republican leader warned it could "significantly slow down" new pipelines at "a time where the country desperately needs to get more pipelines."

Lynch said he wasn't trying to block pipelines, just require they be located in less risky spots. But when he met with Spectra representatives to ask them to move the compressor to a less populated locale, they refused.

"It shows the raw power [of federal regulators]," said Lynch. "It leaves local communities powerless. And it gives the pipeline builders the power to act in a callous way."

Arena and others dug in. They filed hundreds of comments with the federal regulators. They researched air pollution and compressor accidents. They argued that the gas flowing through Weymouth to Canada might ultimately be intended for export. In Nova Scotia, another company had proposed an $8.5 billion LNG terminal — near where the pipeline from Weymouth ends — to ship gas to Europe and compete with Russia gas suppliers. The CEO of that firm had lined up a German utility as a major buyer and said half the gas would likely come from Spectra's Atlantic Bridge project.

Enbridge says it has no plans to export the gas beyond Canada, that it will go to utilities and companies in Maine and eastern Canada, which has seen its own offshore supplies peter out.

Carolyn Elefant, a Washington lawyer who represented Arena and the Weymouth compressor opponents, calls export markets the real driver behind many new pipelines, which use local need as "a sham" to win approval.

At a Dec. 9 congressional hearing on FERC's practices, Congressman Lynch told agency officials they should "take a closer look" at approving projects like the Weymouth compressor that claim local need but export a lot of the gas.

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In the spring of 2016, federal regulators released an environmental assessment that concluded the compressor station would have "no significant impact" on Weymouth, raising immediate suspicions among the activists that the fix was in.

The private firm that federal regulators hired to conduct the assessment, Natural Resources Group, had worked for Spectra on other pipeline projects, including a Pennsylvania to New Jersey pipeline that would connect to the Algonquin pipeline. After an environmental journalist, Itai Vardi, reported on the relationship, Massachusetts Senators Edward Markey and Elizabeth Warren demanded that the federal agency conduct an independent review. The commission rejected the senators' request.

That fall, while awaiting FERC's final decision, Arena took her case to the top. She went to an energy conference in New Hampshire where Commissioner LaFleur was speaking.

LaFleur was the former acting CEO for National Grid in New England, which did business with Spectra. Critics like Patrick O'Connor, the state senator from Weymouth, considered this cozy relationship "outrageous." A New England business group that Spectra belonged to had simultaneously lobbied LaFleur to approve a West Roxbury pipeline extension and lobbied President Obama to appoint her to a new term at FERC.

Catching LaFleur after her speech, Arena brought up her dissent in a decision approving a new compressor in upstate New York; LaFleur thought it could have been moved a few miles further from residences.

"I want you to know that your decision is affecting real people," Arena said.

A few months later, in January 2017, LaFleur and her fellow commissioners unanimously approved the Atlantic Bridge project. While "population density affects the public safety risks posed by the project," their ruling concluded, "the siting of these facilities will not result in a significant increase in risk to the nearby public."

In an e-mail to her group, Arena wrote, "Our fight just got a bit steeper."

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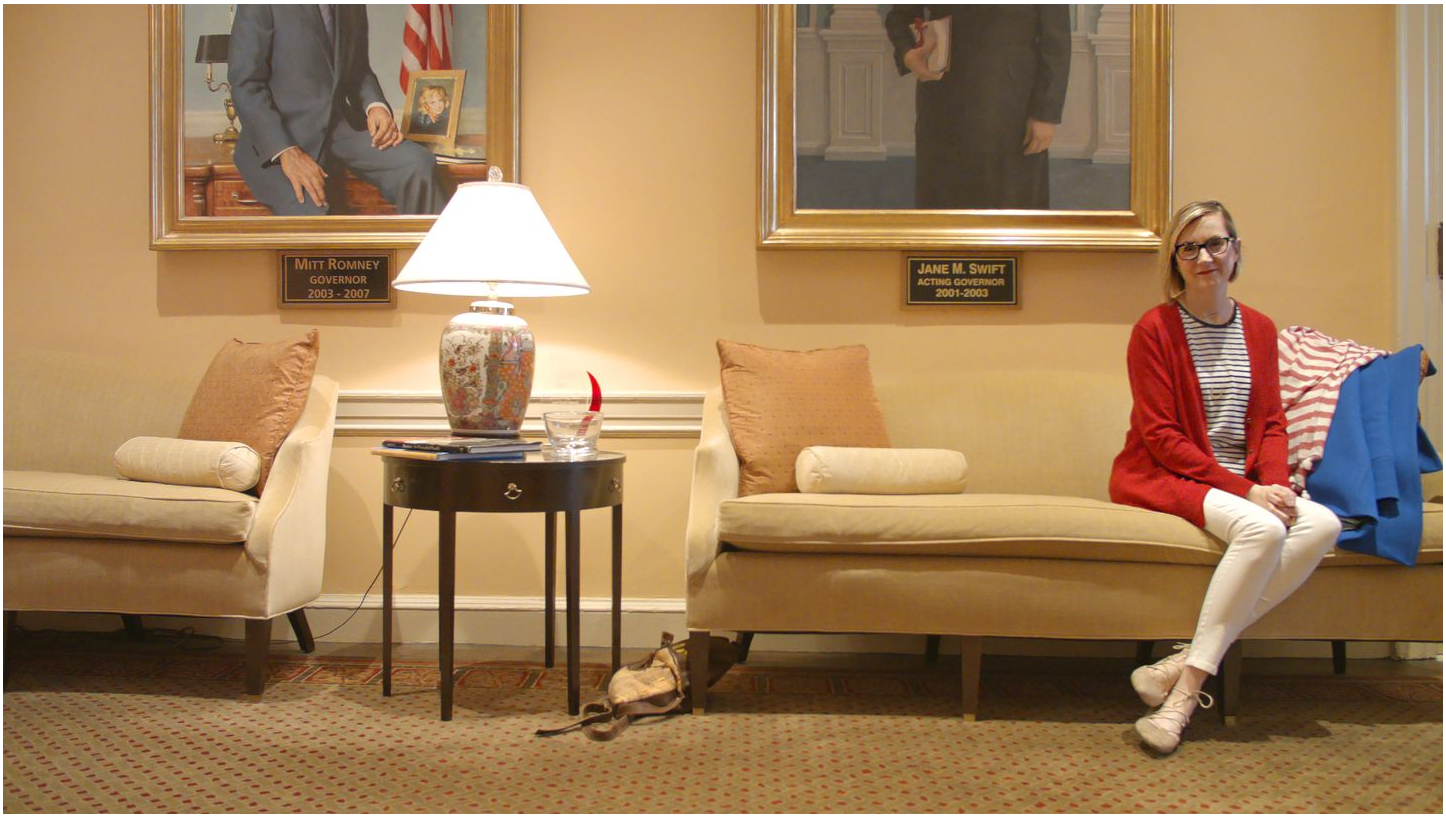
Charlie Baker didn't seem to be listening. For months, Arena and her group had tried unsuccessfully to meet with the governor. They sent him thousands of postcards and petitions. So the month after federal regulators approved the compressor, Andrea Honore began a vigil in Baker's office that would last 211 days over the next three years.

Honore, a graphic designer who lived in Weymouth and had joined Arena's group, walked over to the State House from her office during lunch hour. She got to know the governor's receptionists and security aides — but got no meeting with the governor. Baker told a caller to his weekly radio show that the protesters would be better off directing their pleas to the federal government — "that's really where these decisions get made."



Andrea Honore of Weymouth staged a 211-day sit-in at Governor Baker's office, trying to get him to meet with protesters fighting the compressor. ANDREA HONORE

But with the compressor still needing state air and water permits, Arena and other activists saw a different picture — a governor in thrall to the gas industry. Baker's energy agenda called for more gas, and he had even supported a pipeline tax on ratepayers to finance another Enbridge gas expansion in partnership with utilities National Grid and Eversource.

Baker's onetime boss and mentor, former governor Governor William Weld, and other former associates are partners in one of the state's prominent lobbying firms, ML Strategies. The firm represents Enbridge and has been a campaign supporter and adviser of Baker's.

Speaking in 2015 of the need for more natural gas projects in Massachusetts, Weld explained, "We have a view, which happens to coincide with Governor Baker's view." The proposed Algonquin pipeline expansion, he added, was "a pretty easy sell."

Enbridge's predecessor, Spectra, which has used multiple lobbying firms, first hired ML Strategies in 2015, the year Baker took office. Since then, ML Strategies has been the pipeline company's biggest lobbyist, collecting $700,000 of the more than $1.6 million that Spectra/Enbridge have spent on lobbying since then. In addition, ML Strategies' law firm, Mintz, Levin, Cohn, Ferris, Glovsky, and Popeo, has represented Enbridge in various state regulatory proceedings involving the Weymouth compressor.

During the state's deliberations on the air permit, Matthew Beaton, Baker's secretary of energy and environmental affairs who was involved in the Weymouth controversy, went to work for TRC, a national, Lowell-based engineering firm and Enbridge's environmental consultant on the Atlantic Bridge project.

Baker, who declined to be interviewed for this story, said through a spokesperson that he never spoke to anyone from Enbridge or its representatives about the Weymouth compressor.

Senator O'Connor, a fellow Republican, told Baker that Weymouth was the wrong place for a compressor, and would hinder his efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

"We really wanted the state to become a partner, so we could have a unified front to reject the air permit," said O'Connor. "We thought that was our best shot. "

But, he said, the state never became "the partner that the community wanted and needed."

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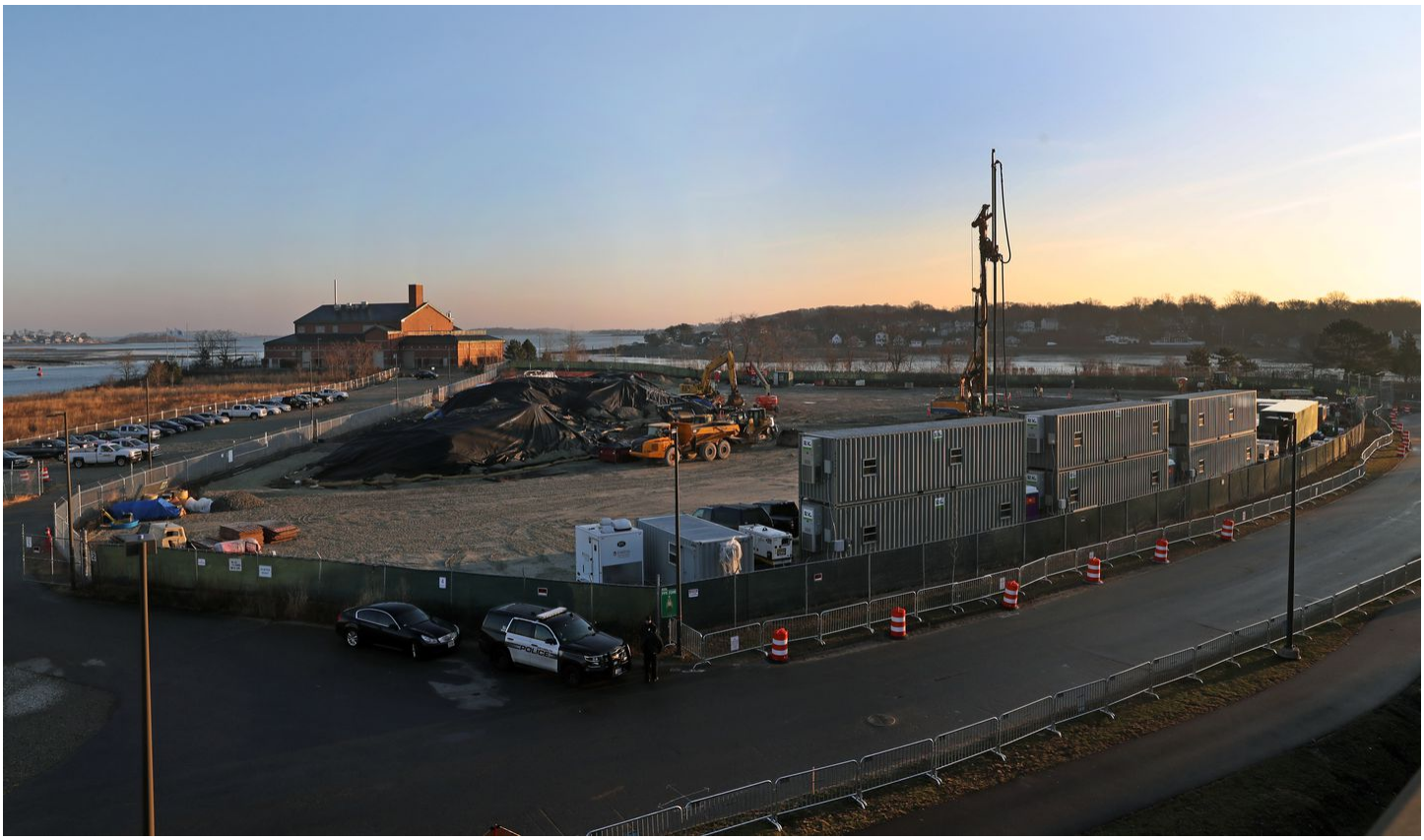
As the lawsuits multiplied and public protests intensified, Baker ordered state health and environmental officials in July 2017 to conduct a health impact assessment before deciding whether to issue the air permit.

The study would examine existing health and pollution and assess the impact of adding a compressor.



This past January, workers began construction of the 7,700-horsepower compressor, which would pump gas under high pressure to speed its journey north, as far away as Nova Scotia. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

Dr. Regina LaRocque has studied health risks in the Fore River Basin for Greater Boston Physicians for Social Responsibility. She hoped the state's review would conclude the area was already too unhealthy and polluted to approve a compressor there. Since most compressor stations are in rural areas, state officials said in their final report, they could not find data on compressors "in similarly urban locations."

So LaRocque, a doctor at Massachusetts General and Harvard Medical School, was "gobsmacked" when the report was released in January 2019 and concluded that emissions from the compressor "are not likely to cause health effects."

She said the conclusion overlooked data showing the compressor would emit particulate matter, nitrogen dioxide, and toxics like benzene and formaldehyde linked to cancer and respiratory, cardiovascular, and neurological diseases. And it ignored the fact that area residents suffer higher rates than normal in Massachusetts of cancer and childhood asthma and were hospitalized more for heart attacks and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.

"It was a whitewash," says LaRocque. "It presented data that was highly concerning then did somersaults to say there would be no health impact."

Seven days later, Governor Baker approved the air permit.

"It's probably the most comprehensive analysis within that framework that anybody's done anywhere around one of these permits, and it passed," Baker told reporters.

However, earlier drafts of the report, obtained by the Globe through a public records request, urged the state to look more closely at "public health implications." That was deleted, along with a passage mentioning the potential risk to two poor and minority neighborhoods in Quincy, Germantown and Quincy Point.

An earlier draft recommended that the state revise its assessment of toxic air pollution risks to include existing pollution, not just emissions from a new facility. That, too, was deleted.

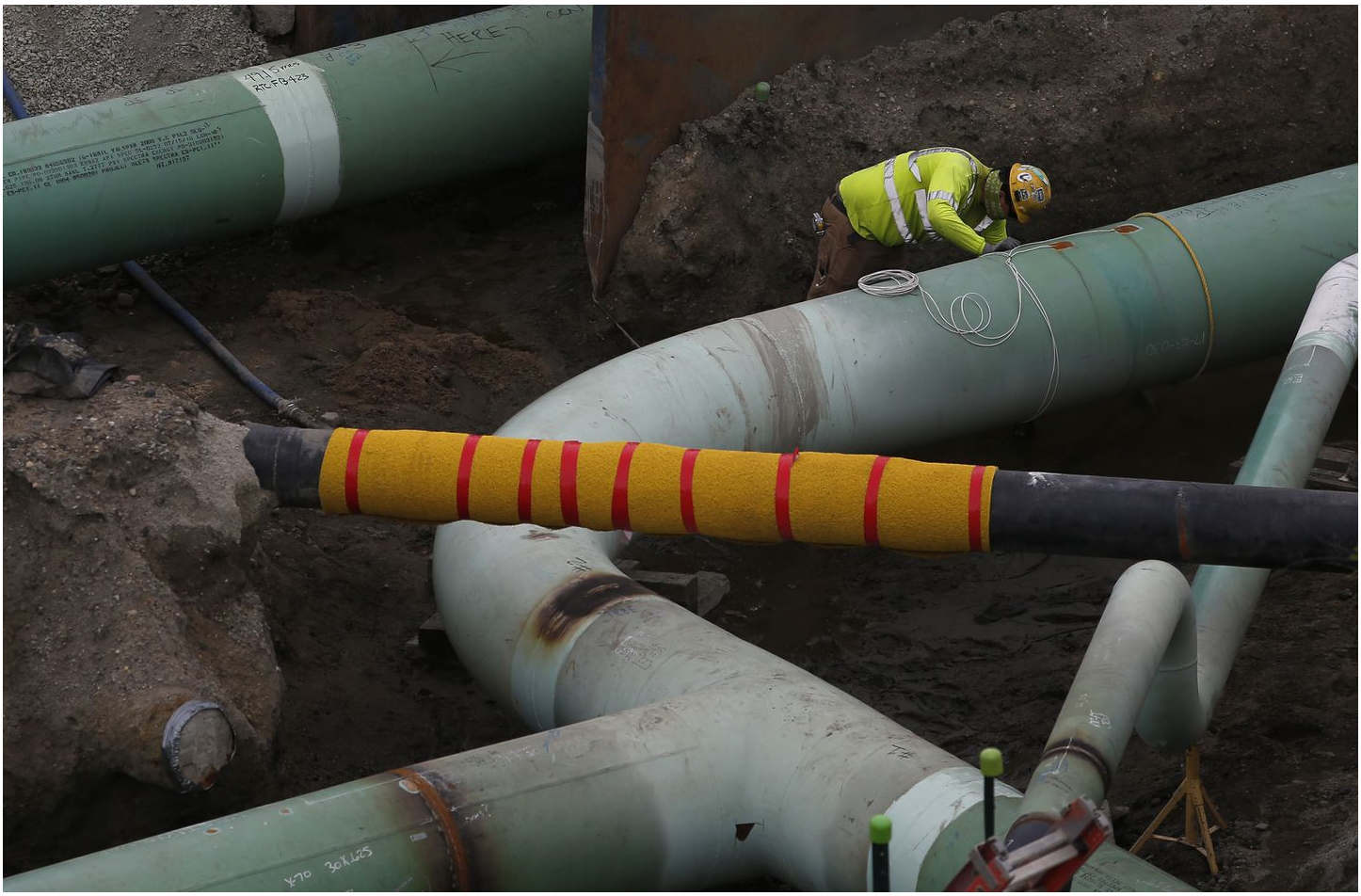
A state environmental spokesman told the Globe last week those items were deleted because the study focused on "potential changes to community health" from the compressor, not broader "policy considerations." He did not address why, then, they were included in earlier drafts, or why officials also cut references to potential risks to nearby neighborhoods.

Before the study even got underway, the minutes of a confidential planning meeting of Massachusetts health and environmental officials suggest the outcome was a fait accompli.

"Need to manage expectations along the way," the minutes say. "Many people think that (the study) can stop the permit process. Realistically the proposed compressor station does meet DEP permit standards."

The state environmental spokesman said the state went "above and beyond" to give the Weymouth compressor "the highest level of public scrutiny for any such energy infrastructure project" during Baker's tenure.

A subsequent independent review by a private consulting firm, however, criticized the health study for not adequately weighing "existing high levels of air pollution" and the health of the people. It also criticized Baker for limiting the scope of the study.



A construction worker bent down next to a pipe on the Enbridge compressor worksite. JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

After the study was released, LaRocque and several other doctors met with the state health commissioner, Dr. Monica Bharel, to voice their concern and urge her to go to the governor.

“She said she understood our concerns, but she said, ‘I’m a political appointee and if I raise your concerns with the governor, I’ll lose my job,’” said LaRocque.

Three other doctors also in the meeting confirm LaRocque’s account — Susan Racine, Brita Lundberg, and Cornelia van der Ziel.

“She told us outright that she wasn’t going to do anything,” said Racine. “She said it would be against the wishes of Governor Baker.”

Bharel denied through a spokesperson making those remarks, but declined to elaborate. When Alice Arena and others appealed the air permit, they received another surprise.

At a May 2019 administrative hearing, lawyers for the state Department of Environmental Protection revealed they had just come across hundreds of pages of new data on air testing done in the Fore River Basin for Baker’s health study. The data revealed the presence of previously unreported toxins, including dangerously high concentrations of the carcinogen 1,3 butadiene.

Nevertheless, the air permit was upheld. In a decision that perplexed Arena, the hearing officer wrote that the state should consider changing its practice of not considering existing air pollution when issuing permits — a change that would “better protect the public health.”

That fall, on the 198th day of her sit-in at the governor’s office, Andrea Honore summoned the courage to get in the elevator with Baker as he left. The tension was evident as his two security guards tried to block her. Baker told them to let her in. Honore, a shy

and nervous woman not accustomed to confronting powerful people, tentatively touched Baker's sleeve as he looked at his cellphone and asked, "What's it going to take?"

As she recalls the scene, he replied: "You have been so brutal to me. I have nothing to say to you."

Taken aback, Honore fumbled for a response: "You've been brutal to us. Sir, when will you follow the laws?"

"I am following the laws," he snapped. "You would like me not to, but I am.

Baker declined comment on the encounter.

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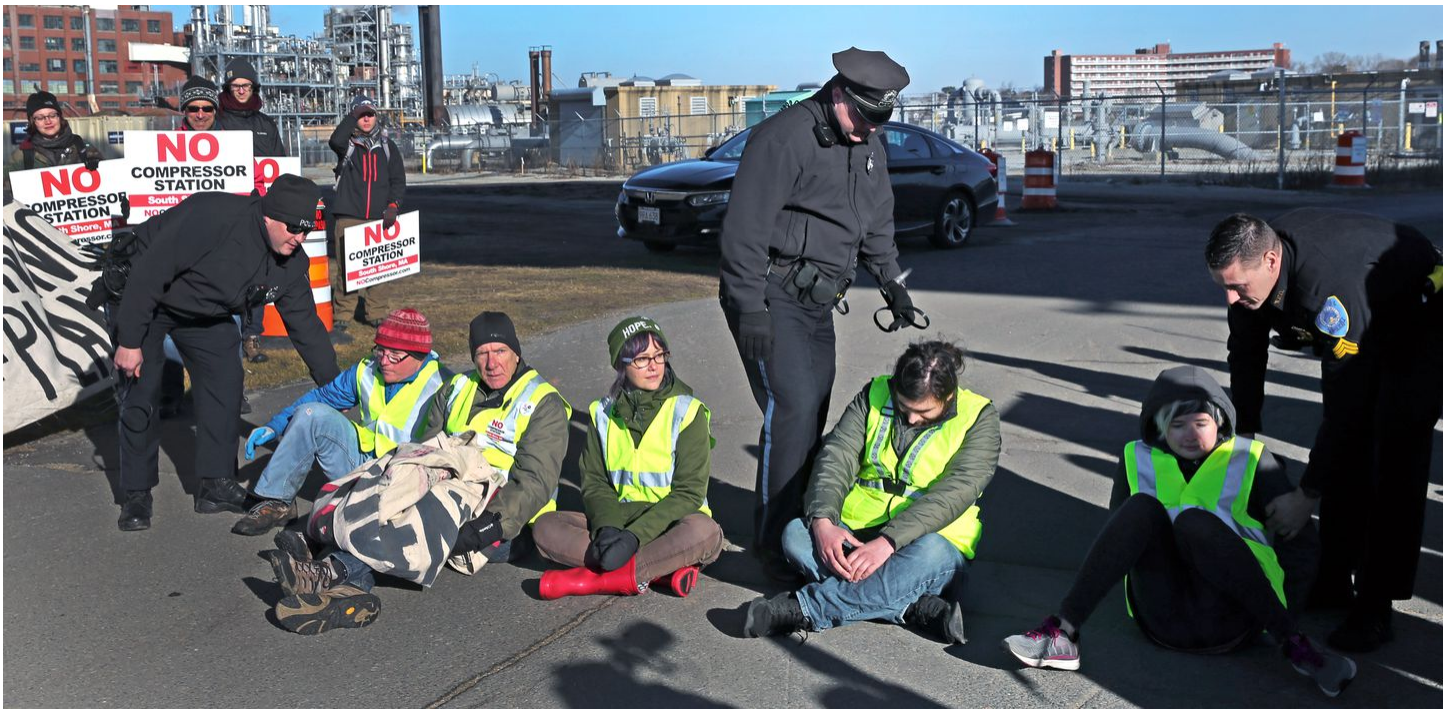


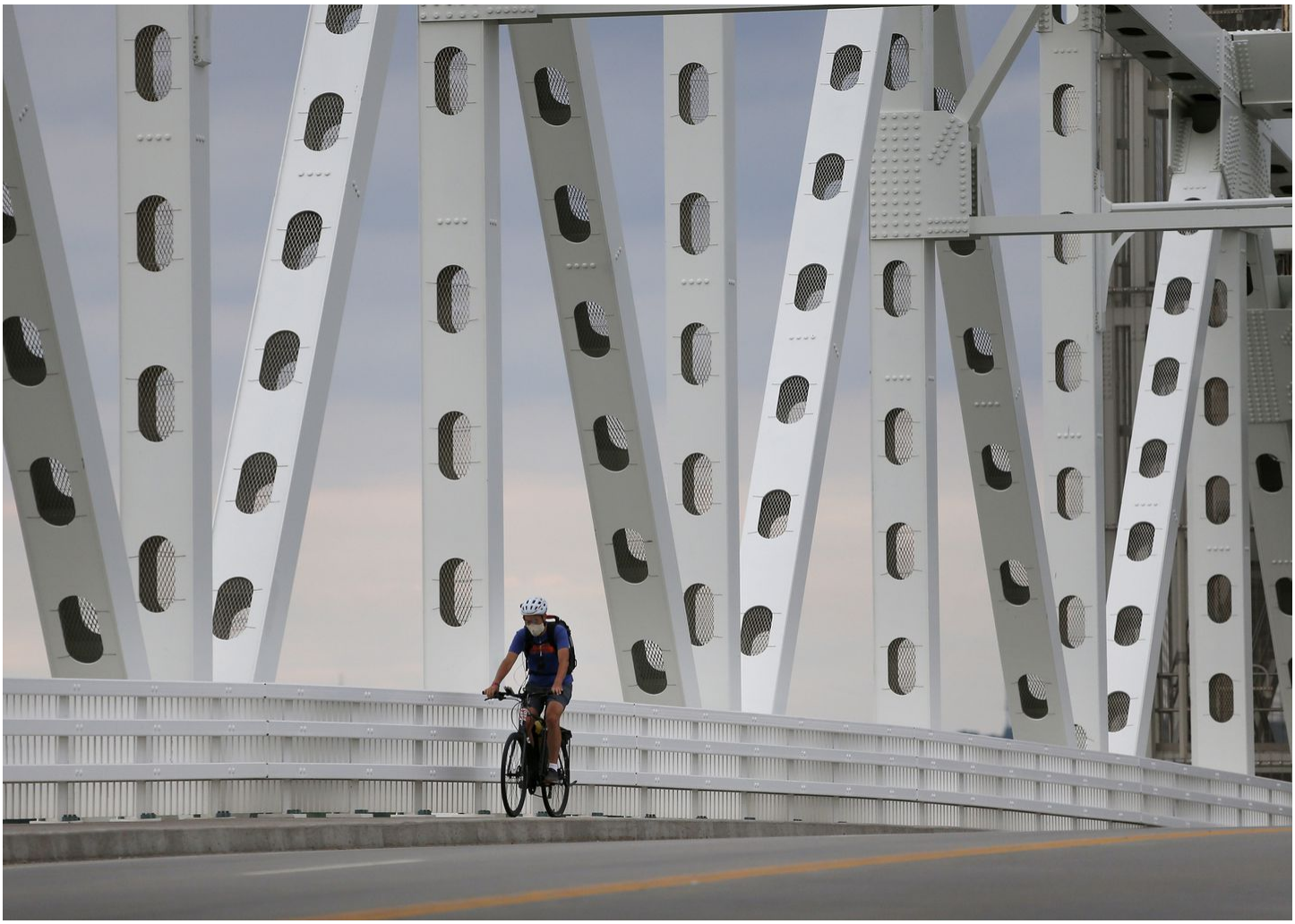
Police arrested a group of protesters in January for blocking a cement mixer at the compressor station. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

With its state permits in place, Enbridge began construction of the compressor station shortly after Thanksgiving 2019 in King's Cove Park, site of the second European settlement in Massachusetts, in 1622.

The Fore River Residents Against the Compressor Station picketed. In the first week, four protesters were arrested for blocking the construction site. Six more were arrested the following week. That night, three of the protesters met actress Jane Fonda at a talk in Boston. The next week, Fonda discussed Weymouth during her Fire Drill Friday climate protests in Washington that ended with her weekly arrest at the Capitol.

The protests intensified early in 2020. In February, bolstered by environmental groups throughout New England, more than 200 people marched. Thirteen were arrested, including two who clambered over the fence and handcuffed themselves to construction equipment.

Boston University scientist Nathan Phillips went on a hunger strike to call attention to safety and the state's failure to monitor Enbridge's handling of contaminated soil. He ended it two weeks later, after the state agreed to install permanent air monitors.



Boston University climate scientist Nathan Phillips biked around the compressor site in July with a portable backpack device to measure the venting of natural gas. Earlier this year, Phillips went on a two-week hunger strike to call attention to the state's failure to address public safety concerns around the project. JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

Then came COVID-19.

The pandemic brought an end to in-person protests. But construction continued. In early June, with the compressor nearly finished, Arena's lawyer called with some good news regarding their federal court appeal — the First US Circuit Court had vacated the state's air quality permit. But it did so on the narrowest of grounds — that the state failed to consider requiring Enbridge to use a more expensive electric motor instead of a gas motor. The court sent the matter back to the DEP for reconsideration.

The court rejected their argument that the state should have weighed the cumulative impact of pollution. Meanwhile, Dr. LaRocque coauthored a series of reports documenting the health risks — including that the compressor would be the Fore River Basin's largest emitter of several toxins.

"This is a tragedy from a health perspective," she said.

After the federal ruling in favor of Arena's group, Baker was asked if the state would rethink its approval. He was dismissive.

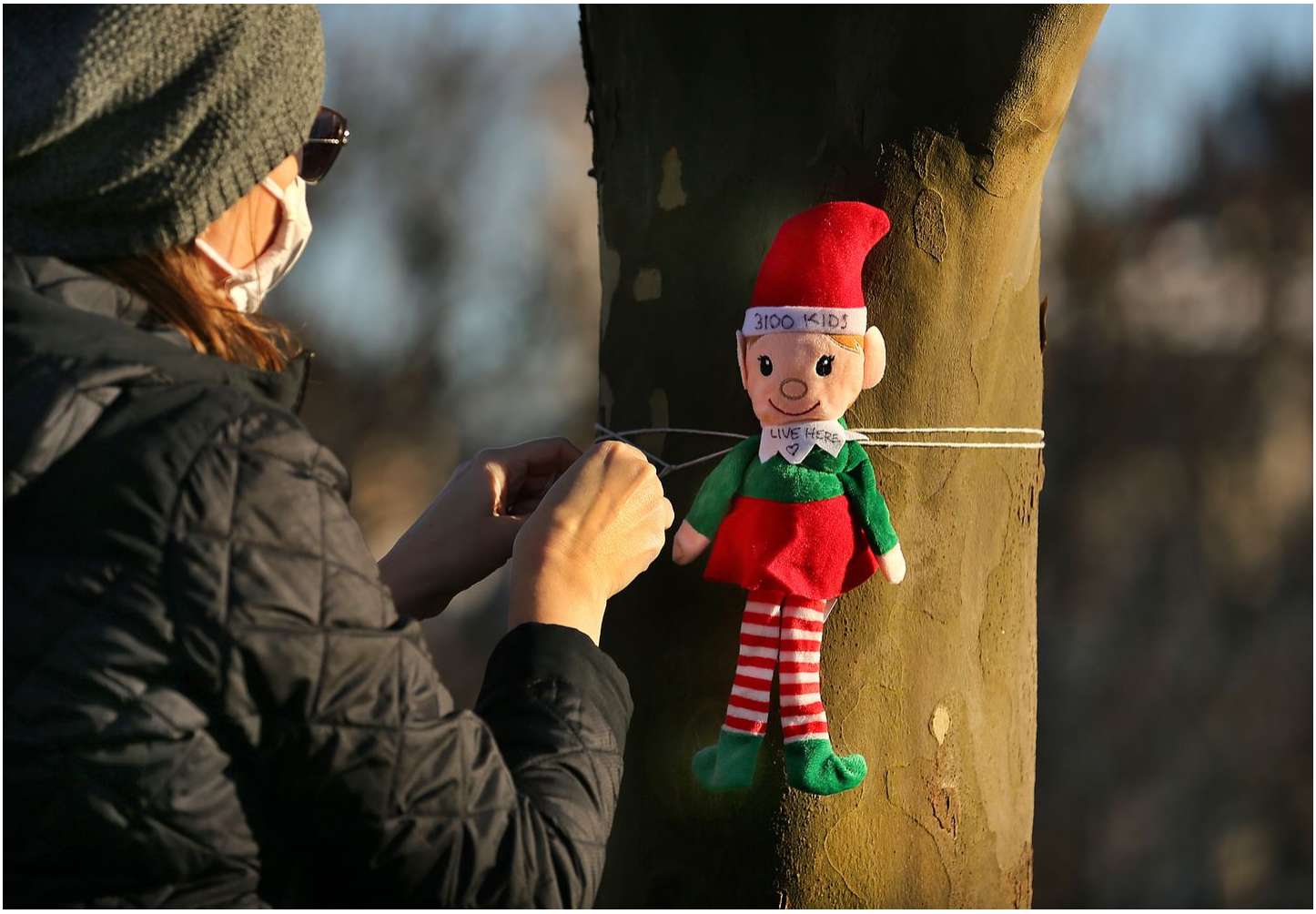
"The court order basically rejected almost all of the accusations that were made with respect to all of the issues that were raised by the locals," he said at a press conference.

The locals. Among the activists, that term stung.

* * *

It's Christmastime in the Fore River Basin. In the pale light of a gray afternoon, the elves are watching.

Residents have brought elf dolls to the site — an homage to one protester who started bringing an Elf on the Shelf doll last year to keep vigil, posting photos to a Twitter account devoted to monitoring the construction. They named him Ash the Elf, for the toxic coal ash excavated from the site where an old power plant once stood. By Christmas, Arena said, they hope to deploy 310 elves, each representing 10 of the 3,100 children "who live in the shadow of this toxic facility."



In early December, Andrea Honore from Weymouth attached an elf to a tree overlooking the facility. The elves represent the 3,100 children who live nearby. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

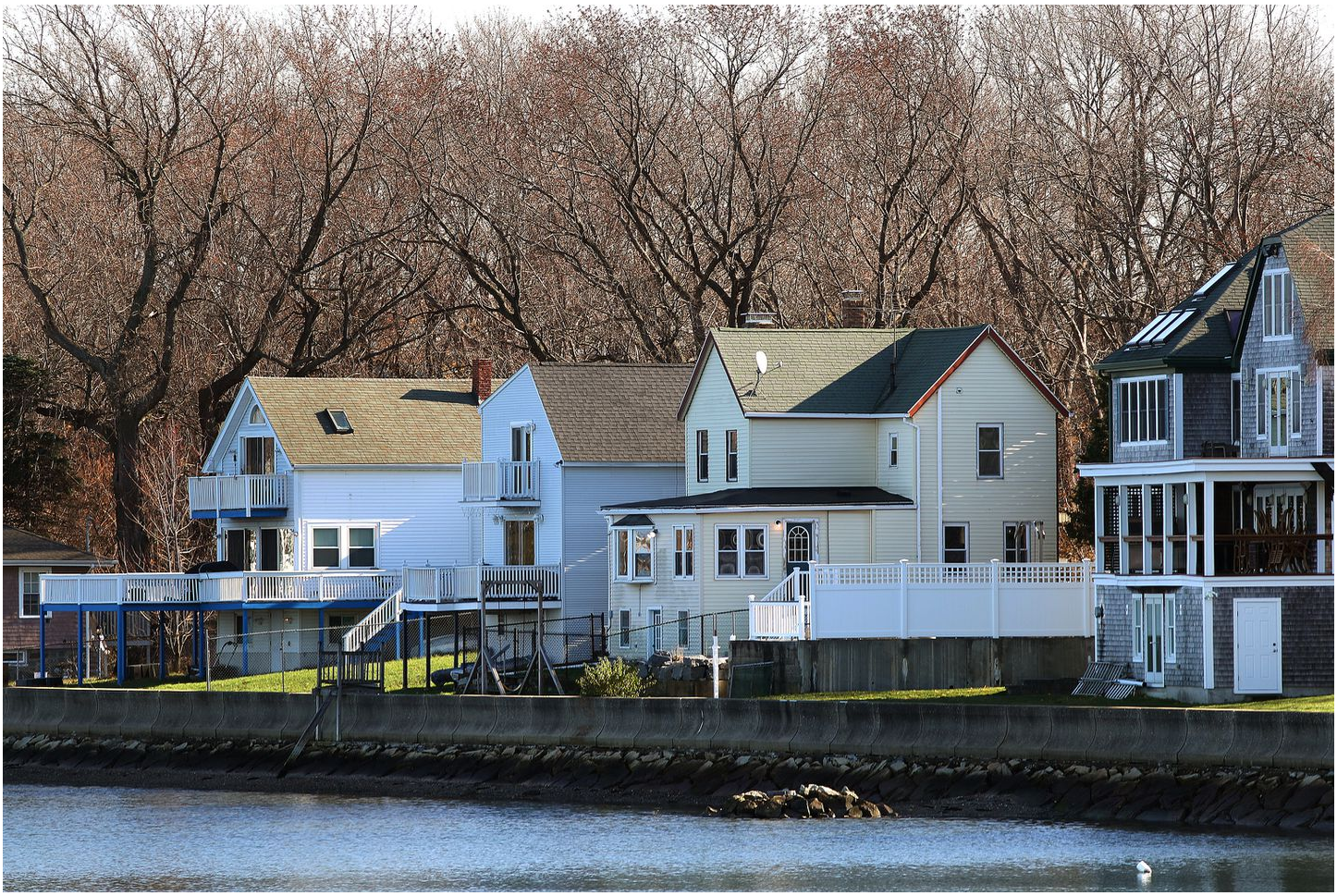
The two accidents in September had brought only a temporary reprieve. Still, the federal shutdown order had said what Arena and her fellow protesters have argued for years:

"The release of large quantities of pressurized natural gas in a heavily populated area carries a substantial risk of fire, explosion and personal injury or death and releases harmful methane into the environment." Allowing the compressor to operate without a study of what had gone wrong "would be hazardous to life, property or the environment . . . (and) result in the likelihood of serious harm."

The first emergency shutdown was attributed to a faulty gasket; the second to a still unexplained electrical failure. The independent safety review that the government had demanded is being done by a consulting firm that has worked for Enbridge — Det Norske Veritas. In 2017, the state of Michigan fired the firm from a risk assessment of an Enbridge pipeline in the Great Lakes after discovering the conflict. Enbridge spokesman Max Bergeron said in a statement that the firm's other work for Enbridge "should not have any bearing on this independent process."

Bergeron said the Sept. 30 electrical failure caused a temporary loss of power to the station's emergency shutdown panel. The company has replaced the electrical components that "could have contributed," and also evaluated the entire emergency shutdown system "to verify that the Weymouth Compressor Station is fully prepared to safely enter service."

That was cold comfort to Arena, who woke up Dec. 5 to the news of an explosion and fire at a compressor station owned by another company in Pennsylvania. No one was hurt, but the lone nearby house in the rural area was evacuated. In Weymouth, hundreds of homes would have been at risk.



Some of the homes in North Weymouth near the compressor station. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

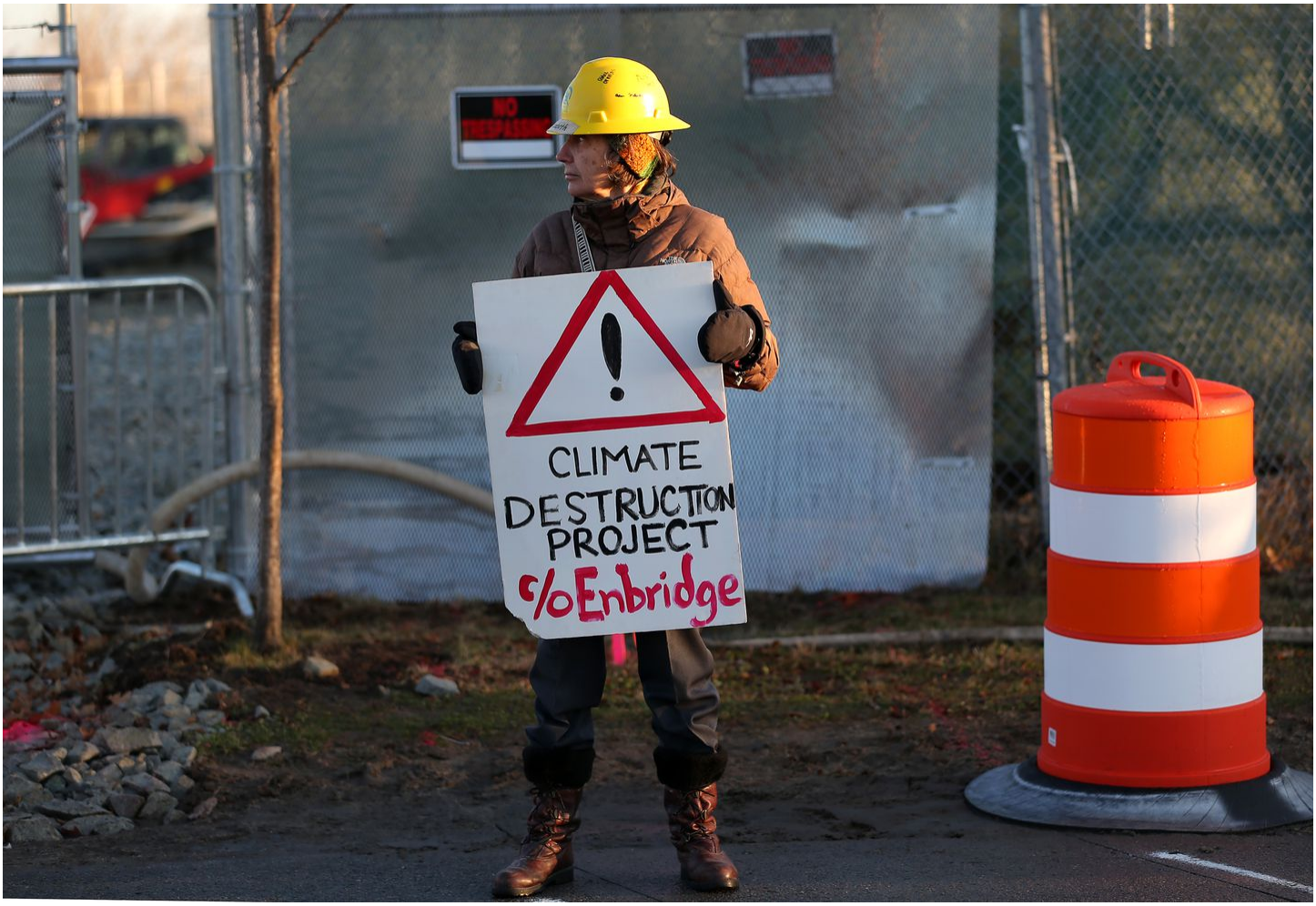
During the safety review, Arena's group lost a key ally. Weymouth Mayor Robert Hedlund, who had committed more than $1.6 million in town funds to two dozen lawsuits, agreed to a $10 million payment from Enbridge in exchange for dropping the town's opposition. Enbridge, and Baker, also pledged to help Weymouth lobby for a change in state tax law that could reap another $28 million in tax revenue on the compressor over the next 35 years.

Hedlund says he took the deal because the town had little chance of stopping the compressor. The delays caused by the resistance, he said, cost Enbridge an extra $40 million. Arena called the Enbridge settlement "blood money." Protesters picketed town hall.

At a recent meeting of the Fore River Residents Against the Compressor, 40 members reflected via Zoom on the struggle. Defiance mixed with resignation and fatigue.

"It's just been really rough," said Andrea Honore, sobbing. "If we can't beat this — and I understand the deck has been stacked against us — how does anybody have a chance? . . . Once I hear that first jet engine sound, it's going to be tough. But it's also

going to be a wake-up call to a lot of communities."



Protesters from throughout New England rallied against the compressor station, which they say symbolized the troubling growth of natural gas in the region. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

Arena struck a hopeful note. They had kept this gas Goliath at bay for six years. They had made a stand that others around the country had taken notice of. They would remain watchful and continue to fight. But she also acknowledged, "We are dealing with grief and stress and burnout as it pertains to our activism."

"We, as a community, have been pandered to by powerful corporations and our own government," she told them. "I want people to get upset. . . . Then I want them to get informed and call the powers that be and ask, 'What are you going to do about it?'"

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