It is almost a year since a natural gas pipeline explosion in San Bruno, California killed 8 people and destroyed 38 homes, and the National Transportation Safety Board has now issued it report. The Board found that pipeline owner Pacific Gas & Electric Company (PG&E), as well as state and federal regulators, were responsible for "a litany of failures." The basic questions are still not fully resolved – How could something like this happen? How can we prevent a repeat? Who is to blame?

There is more than enough blame to go around. PG&E has been nothing short of reckless in its failure to track, manage, and upgrade its explosive natural gas infrastructure. State utility commissioners have been ignoring their safety-related responsibilities for decades. Regulatory managers have failed to press their bosses for more resources and more aggressive enforcement. Rank-and-file civil servants – many of whom are supposed to be thinking about safety all day long – have failed to cry for help. Government lawyers have not been reminding regulators of their legal responsibilities. Since the introduction of term limits, state legislators have largely stopped flexing their oversight powers. The California Supreme Court has nurtured a sense of invincibility among state regulators by largely refusing to review public utility commission cases for many decades. Consumer advocates have fought against adequate funding for infrastructure improvements. The mainstream press doesn't ask many questions about these things before there is some kind of spectacular disaster.

So, who is left to be blameless? It is certainly hard to pin this on the victims. Was it wrong for those who died or lost their homes – is it wrong for the rest of us – to trust that the companies that provide us with essential services are doing what is required to keep us safe? With hindsight, we have learned that it was wrong to trust, but it certainly was not wrong to expect a higher level of responsible conduct.

The rest of us do have a role in this when it comes to thinking about the services we require and the things needed to provide those services. If we are unaware that potentially explosive pipelines are lacing through our neighborhoods, there are only two explanations – that we think the gas arrives on our stove tops by way of magic, or that we just don't think about it at all. Of course, the same can be said for things we flush into the sewer, the water we draw from the tap, and the current that powers our lights. Step one is to notice that we do dozens of things every day that require public infrastructure and to ask ourselves if we are using more than we need. Step two is to think about how the essential goods and services happen, and to imagine what the pipes and wires must look like right near our homes and businesses. Step three? Insist on information and adequate protection. People in

San Bruno are doing those things now. How about the rest of us?