

# First Augusta home gets natural gas

---

cm centralmaine.com /2013/12/22/first\_augusta\_home\_gets\_natural\_gas\_/

By Keith Edwards Staff Writer [email protected] | 207-621-5647

AUGUSTA — Dick Gagnon had recently converted his home to propane when he got word, several months ago, that natural gas was not only coming to Augusta, it was going to flow just a few feet from the front door of his Eastern Avenue home.

A week and a half ago, that home became Augusta's first residence to be heated by natural gas, as the fuel started flowing from a Maine Natural Gas pipeline into Gagnon's home and running his three direct vent space heaters, clothes dryer and gleaming new kitchen stove.

## Contact information

**To reach Summit Natural Gas of Maine:**

**General calls:** (855) 910-4433

**Website:** [www.summitnaturalgasmaine.com](http://www.summitnaturalgasmaine.com)

**Emergency:** (800) 909-7642

To reach Maine Natural Gas:

**General calls:** (877) 867-1642

**Website:** [www.mainenaturalgas.com](http://www.mainenaturalgas.com)

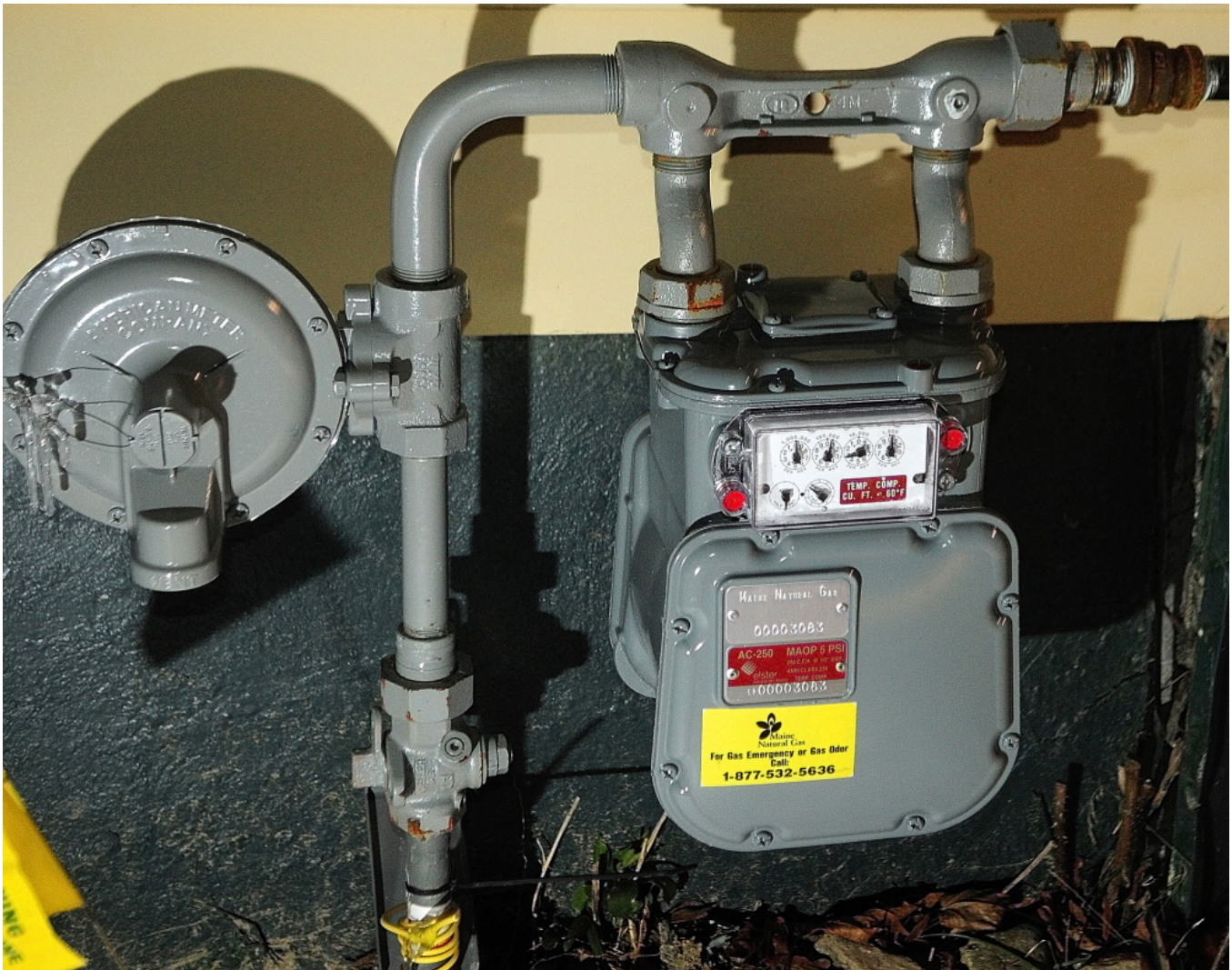
**Emergency:** (877) LEAK-ODOR, (877) 532-5636

**Dig Safe:** (888) DIG-SAFE, (888) 344-7233

## Additional Photos



Switched: Dick Gagnon talks about the five burner kitchen stove, left, and direct vent heater, bottom right, that now run on natural gas in his Augusta home. Gagnon recently switched from propane to natural gas. Staff photo by Joe Phelan



HEATING WITH GAS: an outdoor gas meter on the Augusta home of Dick Gagnon, who was one of the first in the area to switch from propane to natural gas. Staff photo by Joe Phelan  
Search photos available for purchase: [Photo Store](#) →

“I’m heating with it, cooking with it, and my clothes dryer runs on it,” Gagnon, who plows snow for Augusta Public Works, said of natural gas. “One good thing about it, I don’t have to worry about running out.”

Gagnon said he was already saving money by burning propane after his oil furnace died about a year ago. He expects to save even more burning natural gas. He figures he’ll save about \$700 a year by switching from propane to natural gas.

The cost of converting the home he shares with his wife from propane to gas was a little more than \$2,500.

“It’s going to take a few years to pay it back, I suppose, but it’s here,” Gagnon said. “And it’s staying.”

Peter Bottomley, sales and marketing manager for Brunswick-based Maine Natural Gas, a subsidiary of Iberdrola USA, which also owns Central Maine Power Co., said the cost to convert a home heating system to natural gas can range from about \$2,000 to \$3,000 to replace a burner within a furnace to \$7,000 to \$12,000 to replace an entire boiler or furnace with a new high efficiency gas boiler. He noted some chimneys may also need to be lined to burn natural gas.

Bottomley said the owners of 63 residential buildings in Augusta have signed up to get gas from Maine

Natural Gas, many of which, he said, are multi-unit apartment complexes.

Michael Duguay, business development director for Augusta-based Summit Natural Gas of Maine, which is competing for customers in Augusta with Maine Natural Gas and building a pipeline from Windsor, through Augusta, north to Madison, said the company has a little more than 200 residential customers in Augusta signed up to take gas from Summit.

Once it starts flowing gas.

Summit, which started installing its pipeline after Maine Natural Gas' crews started working on theirs in the area, has not yet started putting gas through its pipes.

Duguay said the pipeline is undergoing testing this week and progressing well despite colder-than-expected weather. He said some residential customers could be getting gas from Summit roughly just before Christmas.

Duguay said switching to natural gas from oil could save an average homeowner about \$1,500 a year.

"People know natural gas is at a cost advantage, and probably will be for a long time," Duguay said. "Interest has been extremely high."

### **Getting hooked up**

Randy Turcotte, general sales manager of RJ Energy Services Inc. in Augusta, installed the roughly one-inch pipe running along Gagnon's basement ceiling, valves and other equipment needed to convert his home to natural gas for heat, cooking and clothes drying. He said it took about two days to do the work. He said a conversion from oil to gas would likely take a bit longer.

Turcotte said in some homes, existing fuel lines can be used for natural gas, but in others new lines will be required to use natural gas. He said Gagnon's home needed new, upgraded lines.

"The biggest part of it was installing the new piping, because he already had the space heaters," which were already capable of burning natural gas, Turcotte said of the work in Gagnon's home. "It went smoothly. We're well-versed and able to do this sort of thing."

Turcotte said he's done conversions to natural gas, which is new to the Augusta area, before when he worked in Pennsylvania where gas is common, and said his dad was in the gas business for 50 years.

"It's something nobody around here is used to," he said. "I think it's going to be good for some businesses, change the market a bit. We're getting new conversion requests daily. As soon as more of the gas lines are completed, I'm sure work will increase from there."

Gagnon said he's not worried about his new fuel source potentially exploding or leaking. He noted when he heated with propane, he had a 100 pound propane tank in his yard, and that didn't worry him, either.

"I had no problems with it," Gagnon said, when asked if he had any safety concerns. "If you're going to go, you're going to go."

In 2012, according to the federal Department of Transportation's Bureau of Transportation Statistics, nine people were killed in natural gas pipeline incidents, 52 people were injured, and \$79 million in property damage occurred.

However natural gas isn't the only fuel that has had incidents during its transportation. On July 6 a train carrying 72 tanker cars of oil crashed and exploded in Lac-Megantic, Quebec, a town 10 miles from the

Maine border. The accident killed 47 people, displaced 2,000 others and destroyed 40 buildings.

Officials from both Summit and Maine Natural Gas say the fuel is a safe way to heat, and the companies provide safety advice on their websites.

Homeowners planning a project that will involve digging anywhere near a gas pipeline are urged, by both companies, to call DigSafe before doing any such work, to have underground utilities marked out. The process is begun by calling DigSafe at 811 or 1-888-DIG SAFE (1-888-344-7233).

Natural Gas is the most commonly used heating fuel in the United States, according to the federal Department of Energy, and is used in 57 percent of homes.

To get gas, Gagnon first contacted Maine Natural Gas and filled out an online questionnaire. Pipe was run from the company's distribution line on Eastern Avenue, a few feet across Gagnon's lawn in a trench about two feet deep to his foundation, where a meter and regulator were mounted onto the side of his house.

Then Turcotte ran the pipes from the meter into and throughout the house.

After all the pipes were pressure-tested, Maine Natural Gas started the gas flowing.

### **Summit customers should hold off**

Duguay said Summit customers shouldn't do anything to their homes' heating systems before Summit's gas is available.

"We will have the service line and meter hung, at that point in time, we'll indicate to the homeowner they need to contact their HVAC professional and take it from there," Duguay said. "We'll tell them when gas is at the backside of their meter. They don't want to schedule a conversion before that date. You don't want to do that out of sequence, and make your heating system inoperable."

Duguay said Summit, which is in the midst of a \$350 million project, plans to reach 90 percent of Augusta's residences with gas as it builds out its system bit by bit over the next several years.

Maine Natural Gas' plans are less ambitious, with officials committing to invest and expand their network of pipes in Augusta when there is demand and it makes financial sense to do so. Bottomley said the company's plans to expand in Augusta have changed since Maine Natural Gas submitted an earlier proposal to city officials that projected serving up to 70 percent of residences in the city.

Natural gas is billed by the therm, and both Summit and Maine Natural Gas also charge a monthly customer service fee. Customers pay a per therm rate to the provider for transporting the gas, as well as a market price for the commodity of the gas, which is passed through to customers at the same price the utility paid.

Maine Natural Gas charges a monthly fee of \$24.34 a month for residential customers, \$.39 a therm for the first 50 therms, plus the commodity cost of the gas.

Summit's rates include a \$20 monthly fee, \$.85 a therm, plus the commodity cost of the gas.

For commercial accounts, Summit charges small businesses: \$33 monthly fee; and \$.75 a therm plus the commodity cost; and large businesses: a monthly fee of \$285; and \$.55 a therm plus the commodity cost.

Maine Natural Gas' charges for small businesses are: \$34.77 a month fee; \$.39 a therm for the first 50 therms; \$.35 for the next 950 therms; and \$.30 for over 1,000 therms plus the commodity cost. Large

businesses are charged: \$261 a month fee; \$.35 for the first 1,000 therms; \$.30 for the next 4,000 therms; and \$.26 for over 5,000 therms, plus the commodity cost.

### Costs similar

A consultant hired by the city of Augusta to recommend which of the two firms to pick to supply natural gas to city and school buildings estimated the heating costs of an Augusta resident heating with gas from either company. A Maine Natural Gas user, consultants with Energy Market Decisions said, would spend about \$1,524, on average, to heat their home, while a Summit user would spend about \$1,725. However the consultant noted because Maine Natural Gas' system is smaller, its gas will be available to fewer residents.

The consultant also noted Summit had more rebate money available to help customers convert their homes to gas, up to \$1,500 in rebates from Summit versus \$400 from Maine Natural Gas.

The gas line from the street to homes is installed about two feet underground. The plastic gas lines are installed with a yellow coated tracer wire alongside it, to help workers find the line for service. The lines are also marked, at least initially, above ground with little yellow flags.

Both companies also inject a chemical which gives off a rotten-egg-like odor into their gas, so people can detect leaks.

Keith Edwards — 621-5647 [\[email protected\]](#)

Share

[Read or Post Comments](#)

Were you interviewed for this story? If so, please fill out our [accuracy form](#).

[Send questions/comments to the editors](#).

