In the wake of a campaign waged on social media last weekend targeting National Grid, the City Council passed an ordinance Wednesday that would lessen barriers to fixing big gas leaks throughout the city.

The bill, passed by a vote of 12-1, would lower the cost and disruption caused when opening city streets by improving coordination around infrastructure repairs. It would allow the city to alert gas companies about opportunities to repair leaks when it plans to open up a nearby road.

Additionally, the city could deny future non-emergency permits by gas companies to reopen streets if they refuse to survey and fix leaks when a street is open.

The vote comes just five days after a demonstration led by Mothers Out Front (MOF), a climate change advocacy organization, on the Commonwealth Avenue Mall at Arlington Street raised awareness about the dangers gas leaks pose to public health and the environment.

The gathering culminated in participants going around the city to the locations of known “super-emitters,” or leaks that release the majority — close to 50 percent — of the harmful greenhouse gas methane, to take pictures to post on the social media website Twitter.

Several categories of property crimes dropped dramatically in District 4, which includes the Back Bay, Fenway and South End, according to Boston community service officer Sgt. Luke Taxter.

“Numbers don’t lie. Crime is down in the city,” Taxter said.

In 2016, Part 1, or major crimes, declined significantly across D-4 in the categories of residential and commercial burglary, larceny, and theft from motor vehicles compared to last year, he said.

An overview of crime in the district comparing incidents from January 1 to December 7, 2016, to a similar period in 2015 showed:

- Residential burglaries dropped 43 percent from 296 to 168 incidents
- Commercial burglaries declined 40 percent from 77 to 46 incidents
- Auto thefts dropped 19 percent from 165 to 134 vehicles
- Larceny from motor vehicles dropped 14 percent from 703 to 606 incidents

Taxter attributed the reduced crime rate to “a combination of significant arrests (of active criminals) and effective investigations,” he said.

After the driest summer in 150 years, groundwater levels in Boston are recovering, though hot spots in the Back Bay and South End remain vulnerable.

Low groundwater poses a significant threat to many Boston buildings. These structures rest on wood pilings that begin to rot once exposed to air. Oxygen-reliant microbes attack the wood once it is above water, but, unlike corrosion, the decay process stops once the water level rises and the microbes die.

Hot spots often have lower groundwater levels than surrounding areas, according to Christian Simonelli, executive director of the Boston Groundwater Trust (BGT). But he says these areas have benefited from the 6 inches of rainfall in October, which is more than the city had in the previous four months.

“It gives you an idea of where we are drought-wise,” Simonelli quipped darkly.

In the Back Bay, he said that the area around Fairfield and Beacon Streets has shown lower groundwater since the middle of this year’s drought.

In the South End, levels on Clarendon Street, as well as the area between Chandler and Appleton Streets, are also low and have been for several years. Simonelli is trying to determine why there are drops in these areas and around the city in general.
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**Groundwater**

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Some other hot spots, according to the BGT well locations map, include Blagden Street and Trinity Place in the Back Bay and Boylston Street on Beacon Hill. Wells on Stuart Street, from Berkeley to Clarendon Streets, are low. In the Fenway, a stretch of Burbank Street has low readings.

“In September we had numbers we had never seen, 4 to 5 feet. If the piles are 5 feet and the groundwater level is at 4 feet, a foot of the pile is exposed to air and will rot,” Simonelli said.

The BGT assigns an elevation level of five to the City of Boston, meaning, most pilings supporting buildings are 5 feet high.

Readings over the month of November in the city’s 19 different well zones showed many wells to be in the five to seven range, Simonelli said, indicating a general improvement over readings in September. The BGT did not measure wells in December, and readings will resume in January.

This year’s historic drought is one reason for the low groundwater levels.

“Typically, Boston gets 40 to 45 inches of rain a year. This year we’re at 29, at 11 months out of the year. So we definitely need more rain,” Simonelli explained.

Another reason some of the so-called hot spots may have low groundwater levels is due to compromised infrastructure.

Anything below ground, such as pipes, sewers or subway tunnels, has the potential to damage the well network. If a subway tunnel has a hole or is not completely watertight, it can cause groundwater to leak into the tunnel, depleting valuable water from the ground-water table.

“Imagine you had a bathtub full of water, and it springs a leak. All the water is eventually going to drain into that hole,” Simonelli explained.

That was the case on Dartmouth Street four years ago. After noticing unusually low levels in that area, a leak was discovered in a sewer.

“We fixed that, and the groundwater levels came back up and have been fine ever since,” Simonelli said.