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Texas, federal leaders push for bus safety improvements

Bill in Congress would require seat belts, raise driver standards

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A charter bus carrying religious pilgrims from Houston to Missouri plunged 12 feet down an embankment off U.S. 75 and landed on its side.



AUSTIN — The tragic bus crash Friday that claimed the lives of at least 17 Texans on a church pilgrimage to Missouri will likely spark a renewed push for legislation to improve the safety of motor coach travel nationwide.

Meanwhile, officials have scheduled a news conference at 2 p.m. Sunday in Sherman to discuss the crash.

For months, U.S. Sens. Kay Bailey Hutchison, R-Texas, and Sherrod Brown, D-Ohio, have been cajoling their colleagues in Washington to back the Motorcoach Enhanced Safety Act. The measure, still awaiting floor action, would require the U.S. Transportation Department to take sweeping action to bolster the safety of the nation's bus fleet and improve training standards for drivers.

State Sen. Kim Brimer, R-Fort Worth, also plans to press the issue in Texas and will question whether state action is needed when his Transportation and Homeland Security Committee meets Tuesday in Irving.

In Washington, Hutchison's office said a hearing on bus safety is scheduled for next month.

A spokesman said the senator does not intend to exploit Friday's tragedy to boost her legislation.

Advocacy groups have been increasingly vocal about the need for the federal safety act after a string of fatal motor coach accidents in recent years. One of the most highly publicized happened Sept. 23, 2005, on a gridlocked highway near Dallas: A bus carrying nursing-home residents fleeing Hurricane Rita was rocked by several explosions after one of its wheels caught fire, killing 23.

In prepared testimony for a recent congressional hearing, **Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety** said the issue is critical.

"Motor coaches are the passenger airliners of America's highways. Yet the U.S. Department of Transportation does not require that motor coaches have the same basic occupant protection safety features that are routinely designed into passenger motor vehicles," the group said.

Seat belts

Among the items pushed by the highway safety group are mandatory seat belts on buses — an issue raised by a survivor of Friday's accident. The group notes that Australia and many European nations require safety belts on motor coaches, resulting in dramatic drops in fatalities.

In November, Hutchison, who serves on the Senate Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee, released a statement on behalf of the current legislation, citing the Rita-related accident.

"The sad truth is that this accident could have been prevented," she said at the time. "With an eye toward prevention, we can help avert future motorcoach accidents and make the roads safer for everyone."

After two separate bus accidents killed several college athletes, Hutchison and Brown released a joint statement calling attention to the need for federal action.

"One thing is clear," the lawmakers said in February, "stronger safety regulations could have minimized fatalities that resulted from both crashes."

Officials with the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration have said they've taken steps to improve oversight of motor coaches in recent years but acknowledge that there's much to improve at the state and federal level.

Proposed legislation

Some features of the pending bill:

Seat belts Motor coaches would be required to have safety belts for each seat, improved firefighting equipment and shatter-resistant windows to prevent passenger ejection.

Stronger crashworthiness The Transportation Department would complete a study on improving motor coaches' ability to withstand crashes, on features needed to help the vehicles avoid crashing and on how to enhance emergency evacuation procedures.

Safety checks The bill would require motor coach companies to undergo periodic safety reviews; establish a training curriculum for each applicant for a commercial driver's license; and require annual reviews of state licensing authorities to assess the accuracy of physical examination reports and medical certificates of applicants for commercial driver's licenses.

State issues The bus company involved in Friday's wreck had been cited by federal authorities for numerous violations and had been forbidden to carry passengers across state lines, records show. However, Texas authorities said they were powerless to keep the company from operating in Texas. Brimer said that perhaps state authorities need to revisit that policy. "If we got bad actors operating in Texas and TxDOT needs additional authority over them, that's something we [state lawmakers] need to be talking about," Brimer said. "We don't necessarily have to wait until [Congress] does something, if we're talking about companies that are doing business in Texas."

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