

Adopted 7/17/90

Log# H-552C



National Transportation Safety Board

Washington, D.C. 20594

Safety Recommendation

Date: August 22, 1990

In reply refer to: H-90-82 through -83

Honorable J. Edgar Ruiz, Judge
Hidalgo County
P.O. Box 1356
Edinburg, TX 78540-1356

About 7:34 a.m., central daylight time, on Thursday, September 21, 1989, a westbound school bus with 81 students operated by the Mission Consolidated Independent School District, Mission, Texas, and a northbound delivery truck operated by the Valley Coca-Cola Bottling Company, McAllen, Texas, collided at Bryan Road and Farm-to-Market Road Number 676 (FM 676) in Alton, Texas. Nineteen students died at the accident scene, and two died later in the hospital. The 21 fatalities were the result of drowning or complications related to the submersion. Furthermore, 3 students sustained serious injuries, 46 others sustained minor injuries, and 11 students were not injured.¹

The signs and markings at the intersection were in compliance with the Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices. The speed limit sign for northbound traffic on Bryan Road south of the accident location was not found. The Safety Board searched Hidalgo County records and could not find the speed limit regulation that would have warranted posting of the speed limit. Based upon the available information, the Safety Board cannot determine whether the northbound speed limit on Bryan Road approaching the accident site was 30, 45, or 55 mph. The search for these records proved difficult because county records were not automated to permit a search for road control devices and regulations. The Safety Board believes that a traffic/regulation inventory system would increase the efficiency of obtaining pertinent information and aid Hidalgo County safety officials in their maintenance of highway traffic signing.

¹For more detailed information, read Highway Accident Report--"Collision between Mission Consolidated Independent School District School Bus and Valley Coca-Cola Bottling Company, Inc., Tractor-Semitrailer, Intersection of Bryan Road and Texas Farm-to-Market Road Number 676, in Alton, Texas, September 21, 1989" (NTSB/HAR-90/02).

The City of Alton had a five member police department, comprised of an acting chief (a lieutenant), a sergeant, and three officers. Officers received basic law enforcement training through the Hidalgo County Sheriff's Academy. The lieutenant stated that the Alton police department did not have written guidelines or policies regarding police operations. He indicated that they operate by the chain of command and standard operating procedures. If they have a major incident, the Hidalgo County Sheriff's office would be contacted to provide appropriate assistance.

Alton does not have an office of emergency planning; however, Hidalgo County has an Office of Emergency Management, staffed by the county coordinator and a secretary. The coordinator had served in this position since 1985. He primarily served as the superintendent of buildings and grounds and collaterally as the emergency management coordinator. The coordinator provided the Safety Board with a copy of an "Emergency Operations Plan" developed in 1975. The Safety Board also obtained a copy of the 1985 "Emergency Operations Plan" developed in accordance with the Texas Department of Public Safety Division of Emergency Management (DPSDEM) and Federal Emergency Management Agency requirements. Although the latter plan indicates that it was approved by the Hidalgo County Commissioners' Court on August 12, 1985, it had never been submitted to the court or to the Texas DPSDEM in accordance with State requirements.

As the various police and rescue units arrived on the scene, they initially functioned independently of each other in a reasonably efficient manner, rather than in a typical on-scene incident command situation.² The initial lack of coordination between police and rescue units may have contributed to early problems with crowd and traffic control.

Therefore, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that the Hidalgo County:

Develop a system to identify all traffic regulations and traffic control devices in the county and other appropriate jurisdictions within Hidalgo County. (Class II, Priority Action) (H-90-82)

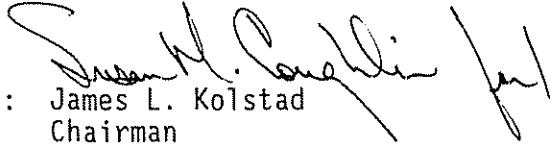
Review emergency response plans in coordination with the Texas Department of Public Safety and update and enforce these plans to be in compliance with the Texas Disaster Act of 1975 and the Department of Public Safety Division of Emergency Management requirements. (Class II, Priority Action) (H-90-83)

²In this system the incident commander divides duties into distinct, manageable activities and designates the management of those activities to a qualified officer or other person. The incident commander then obtains needed information and directs actions to be implemented through his appointed personnel.

Also, the Safety Board issued Safety Recommendations H-90-74 through -78 and reiterated H-89-5 to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration; H-90-79 through -80 to the Texas Department of Public Safety; H-90-81 to the Texas Education Agency; H-90-84 through -85 to the City of Alton; H-90-86 to the Mission Consolidated Independent School District; H-90-87 to the Coca-Cola Enterprises, Inc.; H-90-88 through -89 to the Valley Coca-Cola Bottling Co., Inc.; and H-90-90 to the National Association of State Directors of Pupil Transportation Services.

The National Transportation Safety Board is an independent Federal agency with the statutory responsibility "to promote transportation safety by conducting independent accident investigations and by formulating safety improvement recommendations" (Public Law 93-633). The Safety Board is vitally interested in any action taken as a result of its safety recommendations. Therefore, it would appreciate a response from you regarding action taken or contemplated with respect to the recommendations in this letter. Please refer to Safety Recommendations H-90-82 through -83 in your reply.

KOLSTAD, Chairman, COUGHLIN, Vice Chairman, and LAUBER and BURNETT, Members, concurred in these recommendations.


By: James L. Kolstad
Chairman