



National Transportation Safety Board

Washington, D.C. 20594

Safety Recommendation

Date: February 23, 2004

In reply refer to: H-04-07

Mr. John O'Leary
President
Thomas Built Buses, Inc.
1408 Courtesy Road
High Point, North Carolina 27260

The National Transportation Safety Board is an independent Federal agency charged by Congress with investigating transportation accidents, determining their probable cause, and making recommendations to prevent similar accidents from occurring. We are providing the following information to urge your organization to take action on the safety recommendation in this letter. The Safety Board is vitally interested in this recommendation because it is designed to prevent accidents and save lives.

This recommendation addresses luggage racks in school buses potentially blocking emergency signage. The recommendation is derived from the Safety Board's investigation of an October 13, 2001, work zone accident¹ involving a school bus that plunged off the West Papillion Creek Bridge in Omaha, Nebraska, and is consistent with the evidence it found and the analysis it performed. As a result of this investigation, the Safety Board has issued seven safety recommendations, one of which is addressed to Thomas Built Buses, Inc. Information supporting this recommendation is discussed below. The Safety Board would appreciate a response from you within 90 days addressing the actions you have taken or intend to take to implement this recommendation.

On Saturday, October 13, 2001, about 2:00 p.m. central daylight time, a 2000 Thomas Built Buses, Inc., 78-passenger school bus carrying 27 Seward High School students and 3 adults (excluding the driver) was traveling westbound through a work zone on U.S. Route 6 in Omaha, Nebraska. As the Seward bus entered the work zone lane shift at the approach to the West Papillion Creek Bridge, it encountered a 1986 Motor Coach Industries 52-passenger motorcoach carrying Norfolk High School students traveling eastbound. Although no collision occurred between the Norfolk and Seward buses, the westbound school bus departed the traveled roadway on the right and subsequently struck the W-beam barrier on the approach to the bridge, steered to the left momentarily, and then steered abruptly back to the right, striking the W-beam again and,

¹ For more information, read National Transportation Safety Board, *School Bus Run-Off Bridge Accident, Omaha, Nebraska, October 13, 2001*, Highway Accident Report NTSB/HAR-04/01 (Washington, DC: NTSB, 2004).

finally, a three-rail barrier between the guardrail and the concrete bridge railing. The bus passed through the remains of the three-rail barrier, rode up onto the bridge's sidewall, and rolled 270 degrees clockwise as it fell about 49 feet, landing on its left side in a 1-foot-deep creek below the bridge. Three students and one adult sustained fatal injuries. The remaining passengers and the busdriver sustained injuries ranging from serious to minor.

The National Transportation Safety Board determined that the probable cause of this accident was the failure of the Nebraska Department of Roads to recognize and correct the hazardous condition in the work zone created by the irregular geometry of the roadway, the narrow lane widths, and the speed limit. Contributing to the accident was the accident bus driver's inability to maintain the bus within the lane due to the perceived or actual threat of a frontal collision with the approaching eastbound motorcoach and the accident bus driver's unfamiliarity with the accident vehicle. Contributing to the severity of the accident was the failure of the traffic barrier system to redirect the accident vehicle.

On-scene examination of the emergency exits in the accident vehicle revealed that the 2-inch lettering above the emergency door exit and side windows was partially blocked by the overhead luggage racks. The blocked lettering was further obscured by the students' hats, instruments, and backpacks piled on top of the overhead racks. Because of these hidden overhead warnings, several students interviewed stated that they were unaware of these emergency exit windows and knew only about the side and rear emergency exit doors. The Safety Board concluded that some emergency exit levers and signage were obstructed and not clearly visible and may have hindered the evacuation of the bus after the accident.

The National Transportation Safety Board recommends that Thomas Built Buses, Inc.:

Ensure that all emergency signage is visible in school buses equipped with overhead luggage racks. (H-04-07)

The Safety Board also issued safety recommendations to the Federal Highway Administration, Nebraska Department of Roads, Omaha Fire Department, and National Association of State Directors of Pupil Transportation Services. In response to the recommendation in this letter, please refer to H-04-07. If you need additional information, you may call (202) 314-6607.

Chairman ENGLEMAN CONNERS, Vice Chairman ROSENKER, and Members CARMODY, GOGLIA, and HEALING concurred with this recommendation.

By: Ellen Engleman Connors
Chairman