

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD
WASHINGTON, D.C.

ISSUED: October 13, 1977

Forwarded to:

Honorable Glen B. Craig
Commissioner
California Highway Patrol
P. O. Box 898
Sacramento, California 95804

SAFETY RECOMMENDATION(S)

H-77-17 through 19

On May 21, 1976, a charter bus carrying 52 persons struck and mounted a section of the bridge rail system on the Marina Vista offramp of I-680, near Martinez, California. The bus rolled off the top of the curved bridge rail, fell 21 feet onto the ground below, and landed on its roof. The roof structure collapsed to the windowsill line and all of the occupants were trapped in the bus. Twenty-nine persons were killed and the rest sustained injuries ranging from minor to serious. The bus was owned and operated by the Student Transportation Lines, Inc., (STL) of Carmichael and Marysville, California. The bus was chartered by the Yuba City High School choir for a trip to Orinda, California. ^{1/}

The National Transportation Safety Board's investigation found that a badly deteriorated air compressor drivebelt on the bus had failed before the crash. As a result of the belt failure, air was not replaced in the airbrake system as it was used. The system's air pressure dropped to the point where the service brakes were unable to decelerate the bus on the curved ramp. Testimony at the public hearing revealed that routine inspection and maintenance procedures should have resulted in the discovery and replacement of the worn belt.

To insure that all motor carriers operating within the State of California are operating safely, the California Highway Patrol through its Motor Carrier Safety Operations Program not only randomly inspects vehicles but annually examines and rates each terminal's maintenance program. The

1/ For more detailed information on this accident read: "Highway Accident Report - Student Transportation Lines, Inc., Charter Bus Climbing of Bridge Rail and Overturn Near Martinez, California, May 21, 1976," (NTSB-HAR-77-2).

Student Transportation Lines terminal in Marysville, California, was inspected in 1974, 1975, and 1976. The 1974 inspection report noted inadequate maintenance records resulting in a "C" rating for that terminal. The 1975 and 1976 inspections noted similar deficiencies but for some reason no rating was made. During the hearing the CHP representative testified that the deficiencies noted in the 1975 and 1976 inspections justified a "C" rating for each year. The program provides for enforcement procedures to be initiated when a carrier/terminal fails to upgrade compliance as evidenced by three consecutive "C" ratings. There is no evidence that the CHP initiated any enforcement action against STL. The accident bus was inspected by the CHP and certified in 1975 as roadworthy.

According to the CHP, the "C" rating shows evidence of widespread noncompliance with, or disregard for, regulatory requirements. Although this rating was in effect on the date the accident bus was chartered for the trip, no procedure was in effect to inform the contractee of the rating and its meaning. Users of charter passenger motor carriers were not advised of such ratings nor was there any provision to make such information known to them. Because these ratings were not publicized, the users were not generally aware of their existence or significance. Neither the choir director nor the school representative who chartered the bus were aware of the rating system.

Carriers should be held responsible for ascertaining their drivers' skills and vehicle handling capabilities. The STL driver had never driven a bus before being hired as a part-time driver about 1 week before the accident. During the week, he had driven three different buses and the emergency brake control in the accident bus was located in a different place than on any airbraked vehicle he had driven previously. Had the driver been instructed in the location of the emergency airbrake control, the severity of the accident might have been reduced.

Therefore, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that the California Highway Patrol:

Initiate a program that will insure the availability of information about carrier terminal ratings and their meanings to all users of charter-party and schoolbus carriers' services. (Class II - Priority Followup) (H-77-17)

Modify the enforcement policy set forth in its Motor Vehicle Safety Operations Program to provide for letters of warning and/or the initiation of charges against those carriers/terminals upon the receipt of a second consecutive "C" rating. (Class II - Priority Followup) (H-77-18)

Modify its Motor Carrier Safety Operations Program to require that each carrier is held responsible to insure that all drivers -- both new and experienced -- are properly tested and examined to assure their driving capability and that such drivers are thoroughly familiar with all of the operational functions and controls of each vehicle they drive. (Class II - Priority Followup) (H-77-19)

BAILEY, Acting Chairman, McADAMS, HOGUE, and HALEY, Members, concurred in the above recommendations.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Kay Bailey". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the typed name and title.

By: Kay Bailey
Acting Chairman

