

# Cincinnati bridge collapse kills one worker, injures another

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At 10:30pm Monday night, the former Interstate 75 (I-75) exit lane overpass connecting to the Hopple Street bridge over I-75 in Cincinnati, Ohio, collapsed, killing Brandon William Carl, 35, of Augusta, Kentucky, a construction worker who was initially reported to be operating a backhoe on top of the bridge. The exit lane overpass was set for demolition a mere half hour after the incident, when it suddenly collapsed.

The western end of the overpass fell first, causing the eastern side to then fall, in what is referred to as a pancake collapse. In preparation for the demolition, Carl had reportedly been moving concrete with the backhoe, and when the bridge collapsed he was crushed by metal support beams, which are believed to have killed him instantly. Carl's body was removed from the wreckage at 2:45am, more than four hours after the structure collapsed. He leaves behind four children and a fiancée, Kendra Blair.

Simultaneously, a semi-tractor trailer driven by Eric J. Meyers, of Howell, Michigan, collided with the falling bridge, smashing the front of his truck. Meyers was taken to the University of Cincinnati Medical Center with minor injuries. Cincinnati Police Chief Jeffrey Blackwell told reporters that "the semi driver is very lucky. In a matter of seconds his fate would have probably been different."

Initial reporting on Tuesday by *The Cincinnati Enquirer* stated that "Carl was operating an excavator on the overpass and was crushed to death," but yesterday Coroner Lakshmi Kode Sammarco told the *Enquirer* that "There were two people on the overpass. Carl was on the overpass but he was on the overpass pavement. There was a gentleman in the caged trackhoe (excavator)." Sgt. Mike Miller, a Cincinnati homicide detective told the *Enquirer* that "The crane (excavator) operator got out" immediately after the bridge

collapsed.

The presence of two men on the bridge at the time of its collapse also contradicts the official press statements of city authorities, who had claimed that Carl was the only worker present at the time of the collapse. Neither Cincinnati police, nor Carl's employer Kokosing Construction Company, would respond to calls from the *Enquirer* on the subject, and a conclusive account of the night's events has not yet been established.

The overpass was part of the old I-75 northbound off-ramp to Hopple Street, which is a larger overpass that traverses both directions of I-75 and leads to major Uptown employers, including the University of Cincinnati and Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center. It was a 360-degree cloverleaf exit ramp, which was originally designed to save space in urban landscapes, but pose a great risk to motorists forced to rapidly slow down to a 20-25 mph safe exit speed, especially when exiting from the fast lane.

The Hopple Street off-ramp was such a fast lane exit, and was the most dangerous off-ramp on the I-75 north corridor in Hamilton County, Ohio, the site of 253 crashes between 2009-2011, according to the Ohio Department of Transportation (ODOT).

Its replacement is part of a freeway improvement project that is rebuilding I-75 between the Western Hills Viaduct and I-74 interchange, estimated to cost \$2.2 billion when completed. Specifically, the replacement of the Hopple Street interchange is the focus of the \$91 million renovation of the Mill Creek Expressway, contracted out to Kokosing Construction Company, Inc.

The cloverleaf exit ramp had already been replaced by a new right-lane exit onto Hopple Street by the time of the collapse, and Carl was preparing the remaining portion of the bridge for demolition.

*The Cincinnati Enquirer* reported that the collapsed Hopple Street overpass “did not appear to have any structural problems prior to the collapse. The bridge, built in 1961, was found to be structurally sound and received a high sufficiency rating during an October 2011 inspection.” The collapse is believed by experts to be a major construction accident, rather than a structural failure of the bridge itself.

Linwood Howell, a senior engineer for Austin, Texas-based XRStructural Engineering Services told the *Enquirer*, “They should’ve been demolishing the middle first, and then they would’ve been OK.” Kokosing received fines of \$3,000 every 15 minutes for each lane of I-75 that they were forced to close during the project, likely spurring them to cut corners to try and finish the demolition as quickly as possible.

Howell told the *Enquirer* “ I can see the contractor’s point of view in trying to be efficient and saving time and money, thinking ‘I’ve got to close traffic down in order to work on the middle so let me just go ahead and take the sides out first.’” But he emphasized that their strategy of taking the sides off first is “the worst thing to be doing on a bridge like this.”

Upon inspecting photographs of the incident, Howell and other experts believe that Kokosing’s strategy of initially dismantling a side portion of the bridge weakened the overall structure, thus prompting the bridge’s collapse upon adding the extra weight of the backhoe and steel beams.

Westerville, Ohio-based Kokosing has not spoken to any media outlets about their demolition practices possibly leading to the tragedy, and the death is currently under investigation by ODOT and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration. Kokosing also began their own investigation into the incident Tuesday morning.

Kokosing is the largest highway contractor in Ohio, and in 1992 purchased McGraw Construction in Middletown, Ohio which was involved in the 1994 AK Steel incident in Middletown that left four workers dead.

In recent decades, construction has become one of the most deadly occupations in America and throughout the world, as steadily eroded safety standards, combined with speedup and lower wages, have created a high-stress, often deadly work environment.

Construction accounted for the highest number of



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