

Los Angeles rail accident exposes decaying state of public transit in the US

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More than twenty people were injured Saturday in a collision between an automobile and a light-rail train operated by the Los Angeles Metro public transit authority.

The automobile driver, Jacob Fadley, a 31-year-old student majoring in film production at the University of Southern California, remains in grave condition, while the train's driver, identified as Kenneth Gross, a 29-year Metro veteran, is in stable condition and expected to recover.

Fadley had made an improper left turn into the path of the oncoming train. The collision pushed Fadley's silver Hyundai Sonata into a nearby utility pole, which in turn derailed the first two cars of the train. Fadley's car was so badly damaged that rescuers had to use hydraulic Jaws of Life to extricate him from the vehicle.

The Metro Expo Line servicing that area resumed operation the following day.

The crash is at least the 18th in the last 12 months between Metro trains and cars. Four of these have taken place on the Expo line, the same line in which the crash occurred, while even more have occurred on Metro's blue line, which is considered one of the most dangerous light rail lines in the country. One hundred and twenty people have died in pedestrian or driver-related deaths since the blue line began service in 1990.

Accident prevention measures on Metro rail lines are minimal. While safety experts have advocated for crossing gates, overpasses and adequate distances between rail lines and roads, such measures are rarely put in place due to woefully inadequate funding at the federal and state level.

After concluding an agreement with electricians last May, the Metropolitan Transit Authority announced that it was projecting a \$36 million operating deficit in

2016. It also announced that without additional revenue streams, either through state assistance or the raising of fares, the agency will be \$225 million in debt within the ten years.

Responding to press criticism over the weekend, Metro spokesman Marc Littman claimed that measures separating tracks from vehicular and pedestrian traffic are simply cost prohibitive for the agency. Nonetheless, Littman claimed, "All over the world, there are trains operating safely in dense, urban areas. You can't build a bubble around the rail system."

Metro officials have touted their public safety awareness campaign involving Metro Trains emblazoned with safety messages such as "Heads up, watch for trains" as an effective accident deterrent.

Investigators are attempting to determine the cause of the crash and suspect that turn signals at the intersection may not have been functioning properly at the time. In addition to street-level turn signals, "train stop" signals are also shown to train operators in cases when a vehicle attempts a dangerous crossing.

Regardless of the investigation's findings, however, the Expo line itself has been the subject of serious safety concerns since the Metro's Expo Line had begun utilizing it in April 2012. At the time, transportation experts including USC Viterbi School of Engineering Professor Najmedin Meshkati warned of the dangers of Expo line crossings resulting from insufficient safety precautions.

"I beg USC students to be extra cautious, and take their earphones out when crossing these intersections. They are a major source of hazard," he said. Meshkati, along with USC colleague Greg Placencia warned that inadequate safety reviews due to staffing cuts at the California Public Utilities Commission made the intersections some of "the most confusing and

dangerous intersections in LA county that could pose serious risks of accidents for future motorists, bicyclists, and pedestrians.”

Saturday’s collision involved approximately 100 Metro passengers, with more than 20 injured and 10 taken to a local hospital for treatment of injuries.

Public rail systems across the United States have been plagued in recent years by a string of accidents and outright catastrophes.

Last March, the driver of a Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) elevated train rammed through a barrier at O’Hare International Airport after having worked 69 hours in the seven days prior to the accident. The crash followed a CTA collision a few months prior in which 33 people were injured in a rush hour collision.

Less than seven years ago, a Metro train collided with a Union Pacific freight train in the Los Angeles suburb of Chatsworth, leading to 25 deaths and 135 injuries.

Only last month, the New York City transit authority experienced the deadliest crash in its history, with six people dead and ten seriously injured after a train carrying 650 people crashed into a sport utility vehicle in the Westchester county suburb of Valhalla.



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