

Existing safety equipment would have prevented Philadelphia Amtrak disaster

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The following article was written by a former New York City subway operator with 26 years of experience driving trains.

The body of another victim of Tuesday's Amtrak train derailment in Philadelphia was pulled out of the wreckage Thursday bringing the total fatalities to eight. At least three dozen of the more than 200 injured in the accident remain hospitalized.

The train carrying 238 passengers and five crewmembers from Washington, DC to New York City flew off the track around 9:30 p.m. Initial findings by the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), based on the train's event recorder or black box, indicate that the train was traveling 106 miles per hour in an 80 mph zone, just before it entered a curve, which is under a 50 mph speed limit. The train's engineer applied maximum braking power just seconds before the crash, according to data analysis, but it was too late.

The length of track, known as the Frankford Junction, was the scene of an even more horrific derailment in 1943 that killed 79 people. The perilous line was originally laid in 1870.

While the NTSB investigation is continuing and the train driver, who received head injuries, has yet to be interviewed, one thing is absolutely certain. The disaster would never have occurred if safety equipment were in place to monitor the train and automatically activate its emergency braking system if it is traveling at an unsafe speed in conditions such as a sharp curve.

With such already existing technology—known as a Positive Train Control system—the train would have slowed to an eventual stop at a good enough distance from the curve, and if working properly, the worst that would have happened was that the train would have been delayed.

At a press briefing Wednesday NTSB board member

Robert Sumwalt was asked if the train was equipped with any system “that should have or could have slowed it if it was going too fast?”

Sumwalt replied: “Amtrak throughout a good bit of the Northeastern Corridor has a system called Advanced Civil Speed Enforcement or ACIS. ACIS is installed throughout most of the Northeast Corridor for Amtrak, however, it is not installed for this area where the accident, the derailment occurred. That type of system, we call it Positive Train Control system, that type of system is designed to keep the civil speed, to keep the train below its maximum speed. We have called for Positive Train Control for many, many years; it is on our most wanted list; Congress has mandated that it be installed by the end of this year; so we are very keen on Positive Train Control.

“Based on what we know right now, we feel that had such a system been installed in this section of track this accident would not have occurred.”

These comments were echoed Thursday by Amtrak President Joseph Boardman who said the technology had actually been installed on the tracks where the accident occurred but had not been activated because further testing was needed.

According to an Associated Press account, “Seven years ago, Congress gave Amtrak and freight and commuter railroads until the end of this year to install the technology, on their trains and tracks. But few railroads are expected to meet the deadline. Now lawmakers are proposing to give railroads another five to seven years to get the task done.”

The government-run passenger rail service, which was launched in 1971, has been starved of necessary resources for infrastructure and equipment improvements for decades. Just hours after the horrific accident, the US House of Representatives

Appropriations Committee voted to defeat a meager increase to the already woefully inadequate Amtrak budget.

The signal system is the lifeblood of safe train operation both in commuter railroads and the subways. In New York City, when accidents have led to the death either of passengers or train operators the lack of a proper signal system has almost always been at fault. Either the wayside signal was too close to the switch or the signal was not designed to stop trains at the speed they are capable of going.

This is both a national and international problem. No matter what part of the world, a great deal of factors can affect the ability of the train engineer or operator to function properly. Anything from a breakdown of the equipment, pressure to keep on a schedule, a change of shifts from days to midnights, fatigue from a taxing work schedule with the lack of layover or break time between trips, or a fit of poor health can impair the engineer's ability to operate his or her train safely.

One of the biggest problems of the job is its routine nature. After making many trips, the repetition can have a hypnotic affect and if this takes place at the wrong time the results can be dire. This can happen to any human being. It is not the case, as Philadelphia's Democratic Mayor Michael Nutter suggested before any facts were that the driver, 32-year-old Brandon Bostian, was "reckless".

Positive Train Control [PTC] is the name of the safety system that has the ability to slow and stop commuter trains when they are not slowing down as required. It would have, most certainly, prevented the derailment of Metro-North train in the Bronx, New York in December 2013 which led to the death of four people and injured many more.

After a 2008 California collision between a commuter and freight train killed 25 people, Congress mandated that Positive Train Control be installed on all passenger and rail trains by the end of 2015. With stern opposition from privately owned freight lines and a consensus for austerity by both big business parties, last month the Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee approved a bill that would give railroads until 2020 to install the technology, and another two years after that if they need more time, the AP reported.

The AP further reported that the bill's key sponsors—Sens. John Thune, Republican-South Dakota,

Roy Blunt, Republican-Missouri, Bill Nelson, Democratic-Florida, and Claire McCaskill, Democrat-Missouri—"have each received more than \$100,000 in contributions to their campaigns and political committees from the rail industry over the course of their careers in Congress, according to the political money-tracking website OpenSecrets.org."

Since 2004 some 29 passenger and freight train accidents have occurred, not counting the latest disaster in Philadelphia, that NTSB officials say could have been avoided if PTC had been installed. These disasters claimed the lives of 68 people and injured more than 1,100.

Railroad experts have concluded it would take more than \$21 billion to repair and replace existing tracks and other infrastructure needs in the Northeast Corridor, the busiest transportation route in the country. While both parties refuse to fund these life-saving measures they have spent trillions to bail out Wall Street and fund the American war machine.



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