

Washington, DC: Government officials prepare whitewash of fatal Metro accident

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The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) has held two sets of hearings as part of its investigation into the January 12 incident on the DC Metro in which one person died and over 80 were sent to the emergency room for smoke inhalation.

The first set of hearings, held in late June at NTSB headquarters, shed more light on the advanced state of decay undermining the safety of DC's subway system.

While the Washington Metropolitan Transit Authority (WMATA) claimed initially that fans designed to blow smoke away from passengers malfunctioned, the NTSB has found that those fans were never even designed to clear smoke from the tunnels. WMATA has known this since the 1980s, when its own auditors discovered that the entire ventilation system needed to be replaced, but the cash-strapped agency never did so.

The auditors also discovered massive water leaks in the area where the January fire began.

The most surprising finding might be that the entire subway system does not have smoke detectors, and WMATA has no plans to install any.

A Congressional hearing held in July revealed more about the government's plans to exploit the tragedy than they did about the tragedy itself. Much of the hearing focused on WMATA's search for a new executive.

While a number of board members have declared the agency's poor safety record mandates an executive experienced in transportation, infrastructure, and safety issues, Metro interim chief Jack Requa told members of Congress that "the scope of the search will include candidates with extensive financial management experience and will not require that the candidates have government or transit industry experience."

Rep. John Mica, Republican of Florida, likely

speaking for a large and bipartisan share of Congress, used the hearings as a platform to push for the privatization of the Metro. At one point, he told Requa, "If this nonsense continues in the lack of management and the ability to get extensive management in place, I will work, and I think I can get support, to require that the operations and management be put up for bid and be given to an operating company."

Throughout the days of testimony on Capitol Hill and at NTSB headquarters it became clear that the board is drastically changing its approach to the investigation. Initial investigations into the incident had turned up reports of an infrastructure in an advanced state of decay, exacerbated by a budget deficit of more than \$100 million.

However, during the recent hearings, NTSB Chairman Christopher Hart changed his account of the January 12 tragedy, insisting that it was still too early to know the reason for the incident. "I think we are closer but, on the other hand, when we dig deeper and peel the onion then we see more things that need to be examined," he told reporters, adding that, "this is a complicated situation involving a variety of organizations."

In the aftermath of the accident, the NTSB's investigation immediately uncovered evidence pointing to a crumbling, underfunded infrastructure as the culprit. Within days, investigators were able to report that the smoke had been produced by an electrical current escaping its cable and igniting debris on the track. Such electrical arcing incidents are common in rail systems that are poorly maintained.

At the same time, the initial report found that fans that WMATA claimed were designed to ventilate the tunnel malfunctioned and blew smoke toward the passengers, an alarm system in the tunnel failed to

detect problems with communication systems because it had never been properly installed, communication equipment failed, and Metro didn't alert EMS services to the fact that passengers needed help until the passengers had already done so.

Investigators were so certain of the gravity of their findings, in fact, that they took the unusual step of advising WMATA to address these problems before they had even finished their investigation.

Hart did not explain how an accident whose cause appeared almost self-explanatory in January had transformed into such a perplexing mystery. He did, however, rule out funding shortages as a culprit. "I don't think any system is not fixable. It is just a question of putting adequate resources and talent to the job and I think Metro has that. If they prioritize their resources properly, I think they can do that," he said.

Local media have not questioned the new narrative. The local NPR station's web site, under the headline "Thousands Of Documents, But No 'Solid Conclusions' In Metro Smoke Incident" reported: "On Jan. 12 there was no single point of failure that left scores of coughing, vomiting passengers stuck inside a smoke-filled tunnel about 400 feet south of Metro's L'Enfant Plaza station platform."

James Madaras, a representative of the local transit workers' union assisting in the investigation, also contributed to the confusion, saying: "There's a multitude of safety concerns that exist out there that are unknown."

WMATA is currently facing a budget shortfall of \$100 million, and the American Society of Civil Engineers estimates that America's infrastructure receives only \$1.8 billion of the \$3.6 billion it needs to function safely every year.

In a further revelation that might be disturbing to regular Metro riders, Hart momentarily dropped his air of uncertainty to indicate that similar accidents can be expected to happen regularly. "Not having accidents is pretty much not going to happen ... so the mere fact of having accidents doesn't mean there is something wrong." He did concede, however, that the accident that killed Carol Glover and endangered the lives of hundreds of others raised the possibility of "room for improvement."

Hart is aware that budget crises are being faced by transit systems like Metro across the country, and his

statements amount to an admission that those shortages will be paid for with the lives and safety of passengers. Any remaining gaps in the budget will surely be filled by looting the wages and living standards of transit workers.

Local politicians and journalists began calling for such attacks when the smoke from the January accident had barely cleared, with one commentator calling for a "Michelle Rhee-type takeover" of the Metro, referring to the now-disgraced former DC schools chancellor brought in for the sole purpose of breaking the teachers' union and privatizing schools. Phil Mendelson, chairman of the DC City Council, said the transit workers had "grown fat and happy."

In reality, transit workers put in long hours in a dangerous work environment under unbearable, and sometimes humiliating, conditions. James Madaras, of ATU 689, revealed in the hearing that WMATA bus operators are so deprived of access to restroom facilities in their routes that they are often forced to urinate in their pants. It is Phil Mendelson, Christopher Hart, and the ruling class they represent that has grown "fat and happy," while Metro's riders and workers suffer indignities ranging from self-urination to death.



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