

At least three dead as Amtrak train derails over Interstate 5 in Washington

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At least three people were killed when an Amtrak Train 501 carrying about 83 people derailed and fell off a bridge over Interstate 5 near Olympia, Washington Monday morning. The Thurston County Sheriff Department said the train cars struck several vehicles on the highway resulting in a number of injuries but no reported additional deaths. At least 77 people have been transported to local hospitals.

Two passenger cars fell onto the highway and another two were left dangling off the bridge. All 12 cars of the train and one of its two locomotives derailed. There was initial confusion on the death toll, with some sources reporting as many as six killed. At least four of those injured were in critical condition.

One passenger quoted by the *New York Times* described a chaotic scene with severely injured people on the ground and screams piercing the air. Other witnesses told of drivers on the highway leaving their vehicles to help pull people from the wreckage.

Train 501 is an Amtrak *Cascades* service train, a partnership with Washington and Oregon which runs several trips per day between Eugene, Oregon and Vancouver, British Columbia. The train was running over the Point Defiance Bypass Project, a newly rebuilt route through Tacoma. The bypass avoids the capacity-constrained slow curves, mudslides, and frequent freight train delays of the old route that follows the Tacoma Narrows strait of Puget Sound.

Officials have not yet ascertained the cause of the crash. Multiple sources, including federal law enforcement, told NBC News that they are looking into the possibility that the train was speeding around a 30 mph curve. The media has quoted a certain data source (a train tracking web site) to say the speed was 80 mph, but that may not be a precise estimate and has not been confirmed by investigators.

Why overspeed may have occurred will likely take months of investigation, but there is questioning by planners and operating employees about the area where the derailment occurred.

After months of testing, Train 501 was the first revenue train to use the bypass, and likely even had officials and supervisors on board. The \$181 million project, begun in 2010, rebuilt a patchwork of old freight routes up to passenger train standards and included major projects like a new bridge and station in Tacoma.

But not everything was improved. East of the derailment, the rebuilt route is relatively straight, with a speed of 79 mph. At the derailment site, there is a 30 mph curve for bridges over Interstate 5. While the track was rebuilt, the alignment of the track was not changed to allow for an easier curve and higher speed. Additionally, the mile-long transition from 79 mph to the 30 mph curve is not level, but downhill.

On Monday morning, under rainy conditions, there may have been issues with braking on the downhill grade. Other equipment factors may also have come into play. The planners of the new bypass route may have wanted to realign and improve the bridge over I-5, but with limited funding, it was left as is.

Amtrak officials have confirmed that the route was not yet using “Positive Train Control” (PTC), a system that is supposed to prevent incidents such as speeding into a curve. The system tracks the train and control settings via GPS, compares that to route signals and speeds, and can automatically slow or stop a train if it is going too fast or on a track it shouldn’t be on.

The system was federally mandated without providing any funding, or offering a proven, ready-to-install example of the technology. Amtrak and other national and local passenger rail companies are on

starvation budgets, and have had difficulty paying for the research, installation, and operation of PTC.

Soon after the crash, President Trump seized the opportunity to use the tragedy to boost his infrastructure program. Tweeting, “The train accident that just occurred in DuPont, WA shows more than ever why our soon to be submitted infrastructure plan must be approved quickly. Seven trillion dollars spent in the Middle East while our roads, bridges, tunnels, railways (and more) crumble! Not for long.”

Though its full details have not been spelled out, the program has all the earmarks of a con job, aimed at fleecing the public while enriching private investors.

Given that the route where the crash occurred was brand new, as was the engine, issues involving infrastructure or a lack of maintenance are not as prominent as they could be in another incident. Decades of underfunding of Amtrak—and passenger rail in general—have put passengers in peril, but Trump’s proposed transportation budget in May slashed Amtrak funding by 13 percent, when the railroad has a national backlog of billions of dollars in repairs and upgrades.

Any program to seriously address transportation safety will require billions in additional funding for upgrading routes, equipment, and better signaling and safety technology.



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