

“They knew it was unsafe...they just didn’t want to spend the money”

Death total climbs to four in rural Missouri Amtrak train crash

Jacob Crosse
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On Wednesday government officials released the results of their preliminary investigation along with the names of those who died in Monday’s Amtrak train crash outside of Mendon, Missouri, located about 100 miles northeast of Kansas City.

As of this writing, at least four people have died and over 150 were injured, making Monday’s crash one of the largest by casualties in US history. The fatal derailment was entirely preventable—the collision occurred at an uncontrolled/passive rail crossing, meaning that there were no lights, no bells, or other electronic communication devices to warn vehicle drivers that a train was approaching.

The crossing, which was identified by local residents years ago as being extremely dangerous, also did not have any barriers to prevent vehicles from crossing the tracks as a train was approaching.

Several interviews with local farmers and results from the preliminary government investigation have unquestionably confirmed that Monday’s accident was not only preventable, but predicted in advance by residents who had to contend with the dangerous tracks on a daily basis. These warnings, delivered to Missouri state government and BNSF railroad officials went unheeded for years.

Amtrak has confirmed that the train, en route from Los Angeles to Chicago, was carrying 275 passengers and 12 crew members when it crashed into the back of a dump truck that was attempting to cross the unprotected track at roughly 12:43 p.m. Monday.

In a press conference held on Wednesday, Jennifer Homendy, chairman of the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), said it does not appear that there were any mechanical faults with the train or the tracks themselves. After recovering the train’s black-box, NTSB investigators

determined the train was traveling at a speed of 89 miles per hour, a quarter mile before the crash, which is a mile below the speed limit.

According to investigators, Amtrak workers spotted the truck on the tracks at this time and started blowing the train horn in an attempt to warn the dump truck. At the time of the collision investigators say the train was traveling at 87 mph.

Once the train struck the back of the dump truck, virtually obliterating the vehicle, the driver, Bill Barton II, 54, of Brookfield, Missouri, was ejected from the truck and died at the scene of accident.

The other deceased victims identified Wednesday were all passengers who died from injuries sustained during the derailment of the train. Rochelle Cook, 58, and Kim Holsapple, 56, according to a GoFundMe, were sisters from De Soto, Kansas who were looking forward to going on a family trip to Chicago, their first one in a long time. Rochelle and Kim, were traveling with their mother and niece/daughter who were also hospitalized in the collision.

Binh Phan, 82, survived the derailment but died from injuries at the hospital on Tuesday.

In her press conference, Homendy reiterated that the NTSB had recommended since 1998 that all train crossings in the US be upgraded from passive crossings to active or protected crossings. Homendy claimed that “about half” of the crossings in the US were still passive.

“We still don’t see action on that. It’s been 24 years and that recommendation is still as important today as it was in 1998. Lives could be saved,” Homendy said.

The *Kansas City Star* found that according to the Missouri Department of Transportation's (MDOT) Office of Multimodal Operations, which oversees rail service in the state, half of of the state's 3,800 public highway-rail crossings are unprotected.

From 2017 to 2021 the *Star* found that MDOT had improved the safety features at approximately 20 of those crossings, or about five a year. At this pace, all of Missouri's passive crossings will be upgraded by the year 2302.

On MDOT's website the agency claims that "only crossings with extreme amounts of train and vehicle traffic or other sign distance problems will receive lights/gates because the need is great." In other words, there is "no money" to have safe rail crossings in the US.

A Missouri state report issued in February noted that the crossing where Monday's accident occurred was slated for upgrades. The estimated cost of the project was about \$400,000.

Warren Buffett, CEO of Berkshire Hathaway, which owns BNSF, has seen his wealth increase from an estimated \$96 billion in 2021 to \$118 billion this year. Buffett's \$22 billion increase in wealth in the last year alone could pay to upgrade about 55,000 of the estimated 81,000 unprotected railroad crossings in the US.

Last year there were more than 2,100 train collisions in the United States according to the Federal Railroad Administration, leading to 236 fatalities and 662 injuries. In the last 10 years, 2,720 people have died and over 9,650 have been injured in train collisions.

In several damning interviews with the *Kansas City Star*, local Mendon farmer Mike Spencer revealed his multi-year effort to have safety features installed at the dangerous crossing, to no avail.

Spencer told the *Star* that he and other members of the community had been in contact with BNSF railroad, which owns the tracks, a safety engineer from the Missouri Department of Transportation, a county commissioner and a railroad engineer. Spencer said that there were three uncontrolled crossings, including the site of Monday's crash, that he and others had identified as needing safety improvements.

"I was under the impression that this was going to be fixed

starting in July of last year," Spencer told the *Star*. "They (BNSF/MDOT) promised me July 1st, they were going to fix three of these crossings."

The farmer recalled that by the time November 2021 came around, "nothing was done," yet he was told by government officials not to "put any pressure" on anyone. Spencer said he called MDOT again in January, only to be told that the issue had been "tabled" and that "nothing" would be done "in the foreseeable future."

Spencer, who said if it was up to him he would have fixed it himself, called again to ask if he could "cut the brush back" because "no one would be able to see the train." Spencer said that he never got a response.

"I predicted this was going to happen," Spencer said. "I was certain that this was going to happen, it was just a matter of time. I had already talked to several of the neighbors around here. That's the reason I posted it on Facebook." On June 11, less than three weeks before the crash, Spencer posted a video on Facebook of a BNSF train crossing the intersection.

In the post he wrote: "We have been on the [railroad] for several years about fixing the approach by building the road up, putting in signals, signal lights, or just cutting the brush back. ... If you cross here with a vehicle stop, approach very slowly, then look both ways there are 2 tracks and around 85 trains go through there everyday."

Speaking to the *Star* after the crash Spencer said, "They knew it was unsafe. They had determined that. That was pretty much a no-brainer." Pointing to the profit-driven interests that trump all other considerations in capitalist society, Spencer said, "They for whatever reason, I don't know, didn't want to spend the money."

"I think it totally could have been avoided," he added. "This is on the railroad's shoulders. This is on the railroad's shoulders. They have known this is a problem. ... They were concerned, but not concerned enough to do anything."



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