Denver, Colorado light rail passenger train derails, injuring two

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12 March 2023

A light rail train derailed in the Denver, Colorado, metro area Saturday morning, injuring two. Four passengers and the train operator were onboard at the time and two of the passengers were taken to a nearby hospital to be treated for minor injuries.

The accident took place at the Jefferson County Government Center—Golden Station in Golden, Colorado, a suburb of Denver. The station serves as the terminus of the W line. Investigators are still determining the cause of the crash but local ABC News reports say a video of the incident shows the first car failed to stop at the station and went up into an embankment and into a steel beam.

RTD said it was working to re-rail the train and resume service but did not estimate how long it would take to repair the train and station.

The W Line derailment comes after several high-profile freight train derailments in the United States, including the East Palestine, Ohio, disaster and several other large train derailments around the country, many of which were carrying hazardous materials. In February 2022, a BNSF worker was struck and killed at a freight rail yard in downtown Denver, the day after a federal judge banned a strike over that railroad's unilateral imposition of a brutal new attendance policy for train crews.

But this is also the second passenger train derailment in the Denver metro area in the past six months. In September of last year, an RTD train on the R Line in Aurora, Colorado, derailed while making a sharp 90 degree turn. Three people were injured and it took two months to repair the damage.

An investigation by RTD blamed the incident on the driver, who was subsequently fired, claiming that the train was traveling at nearly 40 miles per hour going into the turn, when it should have been closer to 10.

The likelihood of a similar event occurring was "remote," RTD spokewoman Tina Jaquez said, adding that "It is important to consider that since the last derailment, there have been more than 50,000 safe trips operated in that section of track going in the same direction. Additionally, the mitigations implemented reduce both the probability and the frequency, which resulted in the rating."

However, an even more severe derailment occurred at exactly the same location, and with one of the same rail cars (number 316), in 2019. That accident resulted in a woman's leg being severed when she fell through a car door. RTD also blamed the driver for that incident for being "inattentive," but the pattern of derailments speaks to deeper, systemic issues.

Most rail lines in Denver follow major roadways and are designed to follow as straight a path as possible, to allow for higher travel speeds. The R Line, however, makes eight sharp turns as it travels through the suburb of Aurora. The original plan from the 1980s called for the line to be built along the I-225 highway, but pressure from local politicians and officials to direct service to the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus and Aurora Town Center resulted in zigzags on the rail line.

RTD planners expected the diversions to slow train speeds and even decrease total ridership, but ultimately endorsed the plan in the early 2000s. The diversions increase access to popular locations but create sharp right-angle turns that require RTD operators to slow down considerably to make them safely. This slows down the train, which then has to speed up to make it through traffic lights to stay on schedule, Danny Casabianca, an RTD light-rail operator and assistant steward with the ATU local 1001, told Colorado Public Radio.

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“Any minor incident just turns into a major one on corners like that,” said Casabianca, “There’s something wrong in the design. A lot of [R Line drivers] don’t like it because of that area.”

“If you get distracted, it’s scary,” he continued. “Someone running—a dog, a cat, a person—you pay attention to that… Then, oh crap. The curves come up. And if you hit that at 15 [mph], it’s scary.”

The W Line station did not have a sharp turn, but the lack of proper safety equipment like speed warnings and automatic speed assistants, which RTD claims would be too expensive to implement, may have played a part.

Regardless, RTD does not seem concerned about the turn at Exposition Avenue and Sable Boulevard, declaring after both derailments that the likelihood of another derailment was too low to warrant considering the turn dangerous.

RTD seems far more concerned with cracking down on rides by homeless people, who sometimes take “indefinite rides” to keep warm during the winter. The agency announced it will make a decision on potentially banning indefinite rides and prohibiting occupancy of RTD property when not in service, i.e. waiting at stations overnight. The proposed changes are ostensibly to make passengers feel “safer” but critics have argued that the rule changes unfairly target the homeless and could cause harm to those who cannot find shelter on cold days and nights. No such efforts to improve safety on the rail lines themselves are being seriously considered by RTD at this time.

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