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A Metro Train Control System Fails a Post-Crash Test

By Lena H. Sun and Maria Glod
Washington Post Staff Writers
Friday, June 26, 2009

A train control system that should have prevented Monday's deadly Metro crash failed in a test conducted by federal investigators, officials said yesterday, suggesting that a crucial breakdown of technology sent one train slamming into another.

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GALLERY



Deadliest Crash in Metrorail History

Two Red Line Metrorail trains crashed June 22, 2009 between the Fort Totten and Takoma Park stations, killing nine, including one train operator.

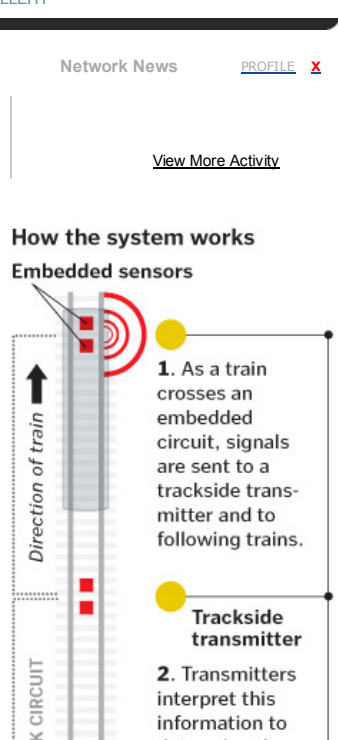
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Investigators with the National Transportation Safety Board performed the simulation Wednesday night. In the test, investigators positioned a train in the same location as the train that was rear-ended Monday. The system failed to detect that the idled test train was there, the NTSB said. Investigators did not say what caused the malfunction, and they stopped short of saying the system failure caused the crash.


The test results are significant because they confirmed earlier findings of "anomalies" in an electrical track circuit in the crash area.

The findings suggest that the oncoming train in Monday's crash might not have received information that a train was stopped ahead on the rails north of the Fort Totten Station. The stopped train was struck by a train operated by Jeanice McMillan. She and eight others were killed in the crash; 80 people were injured.

If a malfunctioning circuit failed to detect the stopped train, it would have assumed that the stretch of track in front of McMillan's train was clear and set the speed of her train at 59 mph, sending it hurtling



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into the stopped one.

The steel rails show evidence that McMillan activated the emergency brakes before the crash.

An NTSB spokesman yesterday said that no one was available to discuss the findings.

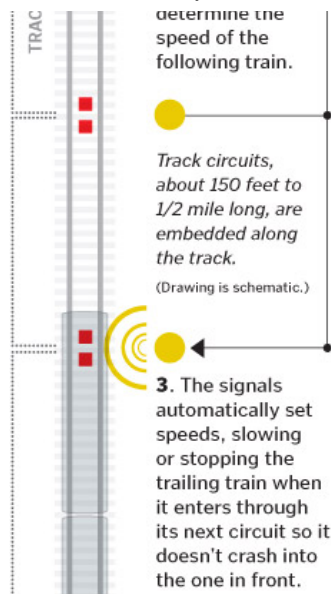
Jackie L. Jeter, president of Amalgamated Transit Union Local 689, which represents most of Metro's front-line employees, including train operators, said she interpreted the findings as proof that the system failed.

A senior Metro official knowledgeable about train operations said an internal report confirmed that the train control system failed to detect the idling train when the crash occurred about 5 p.m. on a curved section of track between the Fort Totten and Takoma stations.

Metro has temporarily reassigned the top official in charge of the train control systems that are supposed to prevent crashes. Matthew L. Matyuf, superintendent of the Automatic Train Control Division, has been assigned to a "special project," spokeswoman Lisa Farbstein said yesterday. She said she did not know the reason for the move. Matyuf did not respond to two messages left yesterday at his [Loudoun County](#) home.

The operator of the idling train, who was hospitalized after the crash, was also interviewed by federal investigators yesterday. Unlike McMillan, he was operating his train manually. He told investigators that he saw a train in front of him at the Fort Totten Station and stopped, officials said. While stopped, he felt a "hard push" from the impact, according to the NTSB.

Farbstein said the safety board's testing will help pinpoint "what went wrong so we can fix it." The agency took several steps yesterday to assure the public that its trains are safe. Metro General Manager John B. Catoe Jr. said personnel began inspecting all 3,000 track circuits Tuesday. Trains will be operated manually instead of by onboard computers until the completion of the inspection, which is likely to take several weeks. Trains on the Red Line will also be restricted to speeds of 35 mph.



SOURCE: WMATA | The Washington Post - June 26, 2009

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