ATTACHMENT #2

RECORD OF WITNESS INTERVIEW
CLARENCE E. LEE

(4 Pages)

NTSB
National Transportation Safety Board
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RECORD OF INTERVIEW
CLARENCE E. LEE

DATE: November 25, 2006
LOCATION: Holiday Inn-Downtown, Huntsville, AL
PRESENT: Clarence E. Lee, witness; NTSB Investigator Paula Sind-Prunier

The witness works in home construction and inspections in the Huntsville area. His DOB is , and he resides at , Huntsville, AL. His home telephone number is and his cell phone number is . He completed a written statement for the Huntsville Police Department.[1]

The witness was the driver of a pickup truck that was located behind the school bus at the time of the accident. He had no passengers.

According to the witness, he had departed the Chase area, and traveled on Highway 72 to I-565 West, and was exiting at the Memorial Parkway ramp intending to go South on Memorial Parkway. There was a white Chevrolet pickup truck in front of him on the ramp. As the ramp split into two lanes, the pickup moved into the right lane, and the witness remained in the left for approach to the Memorial Parkway South exit. He looked at his speed and it was about 50 mph. About that time, he noticed the school bus and an orange car about 300 feet ahead in the left lane. He passed the Chevrolet Pickup, and he estimates the speed of the school bus and orange car at about 55 mph because he wasn't gaining on them. He was talking on the cell phone with his wife and he noticed that by this time, the Pickup Truck was behind him. He watched as the Toyota moved to the right lane, and he observed a black puff of smoke out of the tailpipe, which he took as an indication that the Toyota was accelerating. He was still about 200 feet behind the Toyota and described it as gaining on the bus.

He described the expansion joints on the bridge as "horrendous." He drives a 1/2-ton pickup that has about 200K miles on it. He said that despite the fact that he has new shocks on his truck, he says that he literally bounces over the expansion joints on the bridge ramp.

He states that when the Toyota was about even with the front of the bus, he saw a brief puff of whitish smoke, which he assumes was the vehicles making contact. Because he was behind the bus, he did not have a clear view of the side of the Toyota, only the back, but he

[1] Refer to the written statement for additional information.

explained that he is a NASCAR fan, and he has seen races where the drivers nudge or "edge" one another (sideswipe) to gain an advantage, and there is a characteristic puff of smoke or dust that he's seen, and that was what he believes he saw at the time.

He states that the bus immediately rotated to the left and the right rear corner of the bus seemed to have hit the Toyota, because he saw the Toyota veer to the right. He said that one minute he was looking at the back of the bus, and in less than a second he was looking at its left side. He saw the nose of the bus go up in the air and a cloud of dust.

He thought a tire had come off the bus, and it bounced at least once and came to rest in the lane, so he swerved around it, proceeded past the Toyota, which had come to rest in the right lane, and he stopped at the "Y" or gore area where the lanes split. He ran back and discovered the "tire" was actually the driver of the school bus, laying face down in a pool of blood, facing north with his feet pointing toward the rail. By now, he was on the phone to 911. He states that the bus driver's shirt was up around his shoulders and his other clothes were pulled down, and he could see scrapes on the driver's back. He described the driver as "very obese." He saw the driver take a very deep breath, and then a second, and then he heard air rushing out and a gurgling sound. He said there was so much blood, he didn't think the driver was going to make it.

He ran to the bridge rail and looked down to see the bus, the rear end of the bus was furthest away from the I-565 ramp, the front of the bus was facing him. He could see several students piled outside the bus near the front right tire, and another who appeared partially inside/partially outside the door with yet another student underneath on the ground.

At that point, three black male youths approached from behind and one ran to the bridge rail screaming, "My sister's on that bus! My sister's on that bus!"—and possibly trying to jump over the rail after the bus. He grabbed the young man by the hood of his sweatshirt and told him he couldn't get down there. By this time, the driver of an 18-wheeler that had come up behind him on the ramp came up to help restrain the young man, and then the other two youths took him by the arms and backed him away from the bridge rail. He looked down and saw students start jumping out the back of the bus.

He saw a police car coming up and driving around the 18-wheeler. Shortly thereafter, he heard ambulances coming, realized there was nothing he could do to help and would only be in the way, so he returned to his car and proceeded south on Memorial Parkway.

He stated that someone told him they had read in the newspaper that the driver might have jumped. He doesn't believe it was possible. He states that it all happened so fast, that the driver could not possibly have had time to react. He saw the driver "flop" once on the ground—and he reiterated again, he thought it was a tire. He denied that the bus "hung" or tottered on the bridge rail—explaining that there was only a momentary hesitation when the back wheels seemed to catch, allowing the bus to begin rotating to a nose-down attitude before quickly dropping over the side. He explained that the bus did not "hang" otherwise, but instead, slid continuously along the rail—by which time the driver was already lying in the roadway.

He does not believe that the driver of the Toyota cut the bus off, either inadvertently or deliberately. He states that the driver of the Toyota "had all the time in the world" to pass the

bus before the actual "Y" split—emphasizing this by stating that the driver probably even had time to signal before cutting back to the left lane. He believes the Toyota "bounced into the school bus," and then the bus might have come around and hit the Toyota. He again referred to the expansion joints and said investigators need to "try it in a Celica with a worn out suspension." He said the Toyota was clearly bouncing not only up and down, but also side-to-side, and he believes it bounced into the bus. He acknowledged that the driver of the Toyota might have been going a little too fast, and speculated that, perhaps coupled with inexperience and the apparent "bouncing" of the Toyota, it was easy for him to see how the driver might have lost control of his vehicle. He believes that the expansion joints are worse in the right lane. He also reiterated that the bus rotated very quickly and then slid. He believes that if the bus had not gone over the bridge rail, it would have tripped and rolled because of the manner in which it had rotated while it was still sliding very rapidly.