



July 25, 2017 Board Meeting: Railroad Accident Report: Highway-Railroad Grade Crossing, Collision, Valhalla, New York, February 3, 2015

Acting Chairman Robert L. Sumwalt

Opening Statement

Good morning and welcome to the Board room of the National Transportation Safety Board.

I am Robert Sumwalt, and it is my privilege to serve as the Acting Chairman of the NTSB.

Joining me today are my colleagues on the board:

- Member Christopher Hart
- Member Earl Weener
- Member Bella Dinh-Zarr.

Today, we meet in open session, as required by the Government in the Sunshine Act, to consider the collision at the Commerce Street Highway-Railroad Grade Crossing in Valhalla, New York, on February 3, 2015.

On that tragic evening, a sport utility vehicle was within the grade crossing boundary when the grade crossing warning system activated. The SUV pulled forward, then stopped on the tracks with the driver behind the wheel. A Metro-North train struck the vehicle and pushed it down the tracks.

As the train pushed the SUV, the third rail, which is used to provide power to the train, pierced the SUV and entered the lead rail car.

5 passengers died, as did the driver of the SUV.

9 other passengers and the locomotive engineer were injured. 6 of the injured passengers sustained serious injuries.

I would like to offer our sincerest condolences to all of those who have been affected by this tragedy.

Please know that the NTSB's purpose in this investigation is to learn from what happened in Valhalla, so that others don't go through a similar tragedy again.

As we will hear today, there is much that railroads and regulators can still learn about grade crossing safety, grade crossing elimination, third-rail design, and the risk that third-rail systems pose in combination with a grade crossing.

But on the highway side, there's another lesson that all drivers must learn. It is a lesson tragically taught time and again at our nation's grade-crossings: The next train is always coming.

To quote from Operation Lifesaver: "**Do not get trapped on the tracks**; proceed through a highway-rail grade crossing only if you are sure you can completely clear the crossing without stopping. Remember, the train is three feet wider than the tracks on both sides."

It doesn't matter how clear the tracks look. There is never a reason to stop your car within a grade crossing boundary, either on or off the track itself. And certainly, no driver should ever enter or remain within a grade crossing once the warning system activates. Those crossing gates can usually be broken through with your car.

The next train is always coming. It's just a matter of when.

Now Acting Managing Director Dennis Jones, if you would kindly introduce the staff.

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