



# Safety Groups **PUSH** For New Rules For Bus Travel

*By Greg Webb*

In a charter bus accident last year, known to authorities as Mexican Hat, nine people were killed and 43 more were injured after the vehicle slipped off of the road at a curve, dropped off an embankment and toppled over. Though it only rolled once, the force of the flip shredded the roof and knocked all but two passengers out of the bus. The only two people that were not thrown were the bus driver, who had the only seat belt on the bus, and a passenger whose leg was stuck. This crash was one of six deadly bus disasters in the past two years and has prompted renewed calls for expanded federal oversight of the nation's commercial bus industry. The government recently laid out its inquiry into the Mexican Hat case. One of the victim's mother claimed more government regulation, such as requiring motor coaches to supply seat belts, would have saved the life of her son.

Because some of the newest SUVs have more safety equipment than a typical motor coach, federal regulators at the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) have started to crash test buses, though they claim this process cannot be rushed. They are now in the process of improving emergency exits on buses and wrapping up research that could lead to new seat belt rules.

Since 2000, a year after the National Transportation Safety Board issued a report calling for stronger federal rules to prevent bus crash fatalities, 401 people have died in motor coach accidents. According to the U.S. government, 51 people died in commercial motor coach accidents in 2007, an increase from the 39 that died in the previous year. Data from 2008 is not yet available. Though this figure is far less than car accidents, it is four times more than that of trains and 20 times more than commercial airliners.

The commercial bus industry has been growing by three to seven percent annually in recent years due to the state of the economy. Airlines cut their routes to connecting cities in order to save money, which forced people to find an alternate means of travel. Some consumers also would rather pay less to use the bus system than fly. Buses are, furthermore, very popular amongst "vulnerable groups," such as the elderly and student groups.

In 2007, a high profile accident occurred when a bus loaded with Bluffton University baseball players plummeted off of an overpass, causing seven deaths. This provoked two United States senators to push legislation to overhaul motor coach safety. A version was reintroduced in Congress this year, but the prospects are unclear. Safety groups blame bus industry lobbying groups, such as the American Bus Association, for pushing competing legislation that sets obstacles for the new bus laws.

This commercial mode of travel should be more closely monitored and regulated, similar to the airline industry. Hopefully, progress can be made in this regard in the coming years.

*-- Greg Webb is a lawyer with Michie Hamlett Lowry Rasmussen and Tweel in Charlottesville, Virginia*