

U.S. Proposes Bus Seat Belts, Driver Cell-Phone Ban

By Angela Greiling Keane

Nov. 16 (Bloomberg) -- The U.S. government wants to monitor bus operator fatigue, ban driver cell-phone use and require the installation of seat belts on buses to improve highway safety.

Transportation Secretary [Ray LaHood](#), who helped ban federal employees from texting while driving, proposed the commercial bus safety steps in a [plan](#) posted today on the Transportation Department's Web site.

Motor coaches carry about 750 million travelers annually, with about 19 passengers dying each year on average in crashes for the past decade, the agency said. American Bus Association Chief Executive Officer [Peter Pantuso](#) said the government could improve safety by better enforcing existing laws.

"He's obviously looking at enforcement as a big cornerstone of this," Pantuso said today in an interview. "I think we'll see additional regulation, whether it's seat-belt regulation, onboard recorders, fire-suppression systems," at a "tremendous cost."

Requiring features such as seat belts, reinforced floors, roofs and windows and data recorders on buses may raise the cost of a motor coach more than 20 percent, Pantuso said. A new vehicle costs about \$450,000, and the proposed requirements would add \$75,000 to \$100,000, he said.

"That's a very big cost difference in an industry where margins are very tight," he said. "It certainly will have an impact on the industry, without question. But everybody's got to be operating on a level playing field."

Board's Recommendation

The National Transportation Safety Board, which investigates transportation accidents, last month called for better federal oversight of motor-coach operators in a hearing on a 2008 crash in Sherman, Texas, that killed 17 people when a bus plunged over a highway guard rail.

"The safety board has long looked at the issue of motor coach safety," NTSB Chairman [Deborah Hersman](#) said today at the National Press Club in Washington. "We've seen crash after crash after crash."

She praised the Transportation Department's announcement as a step forward.

"Any progress that can be made to protecting passengers in all scenarios is an improvement that needs to be made," Hersman said. "It isn't rocket science. Other countries have done it."

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