

Senate committee votes to require belts on commercial buses

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Washington -- A Senate committee today unanimously approved legislation that would require safety belts, anti-rollover technology and stronger roofs on commercial buses.

The rules wouldn't apply to school buses. The Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee endorsed the bill on a voice vote. It was sponsored by Sens. Kay Bailey Hutchison, R-Texas, and Sherrod Brown, D-Ohio, and would overhaul the nation's commercial bus regulations in the face of a string of serious accidents.

Annually, Americans take more than 700 million trips in motorcoaches -- as many as U.S. commercial airlines carry. Today, nearly 3,700 interstate motorcoach companies operate more than 34,000 commercial buses.

"Studies show that key safety improvements, such as requiring seat belts and stronger crush-resistant roof standards that allow motor coaches to better withstand rollovers, can dramatically improve bus safety," Hutchison said. "The bill would also help stop 'reincarnated' carriers that are taken out of service and then quickly begin operating under a new name."

Ohio and Texas have had multi-death bus accidents.

"We cannot wait until motor coaches are on the road to worry about safety; we need to do so before they are built. By equipping buses with seatbelts, stronger roofs and safer windows, we can prevent deaths and minimize injuries," Brown said. "With bus ridership increasing, it's more important than ever to pass this legislation."

American Bus Association President and CEO Peter Pantuso said Thursday the group supports the intent of the legislation, but wants to see more fixes, particularly to give manufacturers more time to comply. He notes that bus travel is the safest way to travel -- safer than planes, trains or automobiles.

"We think it's a good step in the right direction. We all support safety," Pantuso said

The pair introduced the bill in 2007. It also calls for anti-ejection glazing on windows to prevent passengers from being easily thrown from a motor coach; a comprehensive evaluation of

improved protection against fires by reducing flammability of the motor coach interior, and better training for operators in the case of fire.

The bill requires a review of fire safety technologies by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, followed by new performance standards based on the results of NHTSA's evaluation; improved commercial driver training; and electronic on-board recorders on all motor coaches for the purpose of complying with federal hours of service regulations.

In May, NHTSA's acting chief, Ron Medford, said NHTSA planned to require safety belts on commercial buses.

The issue has gotten significant attention in the wake of a number of highly publicized, deadly commercial bus accidents; seat belts on motor coaches have been long urged by the National Transportation Safety Board.

"I think it is true that NHTSA was slow to act," Medford told Congress in May.

NHTSA has debated whether to require seat belts in commercial buses since 1977.

The Commerce Committee also approved the nomination of David Strickland, a long-time committee aide, to head NHTSA.

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