

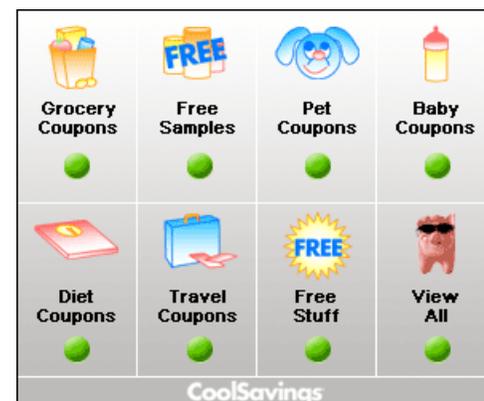
Another CTA derailment raises concerns about system's safety

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4:23 PM CDT, June 3, 2008

CHICAGO



A Chicago Transit Authority train derailed as it rumbled along early Tuesday. Like the train that derailed less than a week ago, the one that derailed weeks before that, and the electrical problems that caused a train to stall deep underground days earlier, nobody was seriously injured.

It has become an all-too familiar story, the list of incidents involving the CTA getting longer and longer. And while service is quickly returned and commuters by the thousands once again pour onto trains, each incident raises questions about what will happen next to the century-old transit system.

"I think it's a classic problem that we have in the United States, the premier transit systems like New York and Chicago and Boston (have) serious deficiencies," said Robert Dunphy, a researcher at the Washington-based Urban Land Institute.

Unfortunately, he said, "It does seem to take a catastrophe to get people to focus on it."

That was certainly the case in Minnesota, Illinois and other states, where a bridge collapse in Minneapolis that killed 13 people prompted armies of inspectors to fan out and take a close look at their own bridges.

That collapse is especially significant because it brought into focus the fact that repairs to the bridge may have been put off for years, in part, because they were deemed too expensive.

"Financial considerations, we believe, did play a part in the decision-making" regarding fixing the bridge, Robert Stein said last month after a report by a law firm he oversaw was released.

In Chicago, officials make no secret that fixing the nation's second-largest transportation system will be tremendously expensive.

In January, when lawmakers averted "doomsday" service cuts and fair increases with a state bill that set up an annual funding stream of \$500 million a year, officials said that amount would not be nearly enough for the kind of work needed.

Ten billion dollars over the next five years on bus and commuter-train services was needed to "bring the system up to better repair, not necessarily good repair," Steven Schlickman, director of the Regional Transportation Authority, which oversees the city's mass transit network, said at the time.

Since then, even more trains have derailed. And that, said RTA spokeswoman Diane Palmer, has Schlickman saying that it may be time for a thorough examination of the system.

After last week's derailment, Schlickman said that he would "seriously consider" an audit, said Palmer. "And here we have another one (derailment) this morning," suggesting that an audit may be that much closer to happening.

As with last week's derailment, the CTA says that a preliminary investigation reveals operator error caused the derailment early Tuesday. Spokeswoman Noelle Gaffney said the operator has said he inadvertently passed a red signal, and when he realized his mistake, he stopped the train and then moved in the opposite direction, causing the train to derail.

She said there was no apparent damage to the track or third rail that might have contributed to the derailment.

Still, there remain serious concerns in Chicago, where the stakes are tremendously high. Literally.

"You have so much elevated track and a lot of it is very old," said Hani Mahmassani, a transportation professor at Northwestern University. "An accident could have disastrous proportions."

In fact, even as the CTA was saying that last week's derailment on tracks 22 feet above the ground was caused by operator error, they left open the possibility that the aging transit system played a role.

"The signals at this location were installed in the 1970s and refurbished in 1996," Gaffney said. "But some components are still more than 30 years old."

That is significant, said Mahmassani.

"It's operator error but it involves signaling and signaling is part of the infrastructure," he said. "Modern systems tend to be more fault tolerant," meaning they are more apt to have backup systems that can prevent operator errors from becoming accidents.

Mahmassani applauded the CTA and emergency workers for their quick and effective response to recent derailments. On the other hand, he said, the kind of problems with the CTA's inspection and maintenance program that the National Transportation Safety Board pointed to in a blistering report about a 2006 subway derailment "kind of explains what we're seeing."

"We are dealing with an aging infrastructure that has not been properly maintained," he said.

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