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YEAR 33 • ISSUE 19

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FRIDAY • SEPTEMBER 15 • 2023

The Crash, 10 Years Later



Members of the media look on by the Fallowfield Station as workers examine the wreckage of a derailed Via train and an OC Transpo bus that just hours earlier had collided in Barrhaven on Sept. 18, 2013. Five passengers and the driver were killed, while more than 30 were injured in what is widely considered the biggest tragedy in Barrhaven history. For the full story, see page 12.

(BARRHAVEN INDEPENDENT FILE PHOTO/JEFF MORRIS)

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September 18, 2013: The day that changed Barrhaven forever

BY JEFF MORRIS

The park at the northeast corner of the Fallowfield Park and Ride peacefully juxtaposes as both a beautiful tribute and a stark reminder.

**Michael Bleakney.
Connor Boyd.
Kyle Nash.
Karen Kryzewski.
Rob Moore.
Dave Woodard.**

They are the six people who lost their lives Wed., Sept. 18, 2013 when their OC Transpo double decker Route 76 bus was struck by a Via Rail Train #51 at 8:48 a.m. The Toronto-bound train was coming into the Fallowfield Station. The OC Transpo bus, driven by David Woodard, had left the Fallowfield Transit Station and was travelling on the Transit Way toward the Nepean Sportsplex.

The crash took place where the Transitway crosses the VIA Rail tracks, just beside Woodroffe Ave.

Witnesses described the sound the crash made, and the ground shaking. People throughout Barrhaven heard and felt the collision.

Just like any other day

Wed., Sept. 18 seemed like the most routine of days.

The sun was splashing warmth on the faces of those who drive to the Fallowfield Station Park and Ride. They had their coffees, grabbed their morning papers, put their ear buds in and selected their playlists.

And then, in a matter of five seconds, one of the worst accidents the City of Ottawa has ever seen claimed six lives. Several hundred watched it, and several thousand heard it. The tragic and horrific sights and sounds have planted a memory of terror that will stay with those near the accident forever. No one in the community will ever forget that day.

And now, all we are left with is a question.

How could this terrible tragedy have happened?

On Wed., Sept. 18, OC Transpo driver Dave Woodard headed north on the transitway that runs alongside Woodroffe Ave. For a reason that we may never know the answer to, the 45-year-old driver crashed through the railway barriers

and drove the double decker Route 76 bus into an oncoming VIA Rail train. In the aftermath of the wreck, stories from those on the bus varied. Most said that, in the handful of seconds before the crash, there were screams. Some speculated the bus driver had a heart attack. Some said he was on the phone and distracted. Most weren't even paying attention.

There are speculations and reasons as to what happened on that day. Was Woodard distracted? Was he blinded by the sun for a second or two? Did he take his eyes off the road to look at the monitor for a second or two? Maybe it was all of the above. Maybe it was none of the above. All we can do is speculate.

Regardless of how it happened, Dave Woodard was killed in the accident. Also killed in the crash were Michael Bleakney, 57; Connor Boyd, 21; Kyle Nash, 21; Karen Krzyzewski, 53; and Rob More, 35. Another 37 passengers were injured. They were sent to the Queensway Carleton Hospital, the Ottawa Civic Hospital, or the Montfort



The front of the OC Transpo bus was severed off by the VIA train in the collision that killed six people. (TRANSPORT SAFETY BOARD OF CANADA PHOTO)

Hospital, depending on the types and severities of the injuries. While Woodroffe Avenue remained closed to traffic, an emergency centre was set up at the Nepean Sportsplex.

"My first gut instinct is maybe he had a heart attack, maybe next thing was mechanical failure of the

bus," said Steve Woodard, the brother of the driver, in a CTV interview. "There's no way he wasn't paying attention or doing what he shouldn't have been doing. Safety was his first priority."

Woodard's widow, Terry, made a plea to the public not to blame her husband for the horrific crash. She wanted OC Transpo to retire Route 76, which they did.

In the early afternoon, Nepean-Carleton MPP Lisa MacLeod arrived from Queen's Park. She was interrupted while giving a speech. Staff members at her office heard the crash and contacted her immediately. So did Prime Minister Stephen Harper.

"I had to get here as fast as I could," she said as she fought back tears at the scene. "I can't believe it."

Gregory Mech, a passenger on the bus, spoke to reporters after the crash.

"From what I can tell the bus driver did not notice that these train tracks signal lights were on and the gates were down," said Mech. "People screamed on the bus shortly before the crash because he was not stopping."

The Transit Safety Board

began their investigation almost immediately. Two days after the crash, they determined that the gates, lights and bells at the rail crossing were all in proper working order, having been activated 47 seconds before the collision. The barrier gates were fully horizontal 25 seconds prior to impact. According to the TSB, the train's emergency brakes were applied two seconds before the collision. The train was travelling at 47 mph, well below the maximum allowable speed. Because of a City of Ottawa ban on train whistles, the train did not blow its whistle as it approached the intersection. However, the flashing lights, bells and barriers were all in working order.

"Going forward we commit to conducting a comprehensive and thorough investigation to try and explain what happened and why," TSB investigator Rob Johnston told reporters at the time. "Only by doing that can we hope to prevent this kind of accident from happening again in Canada."



Dozens of workers were on site a little over an hour after the VIA rail train collided with an OC Transpo bus in Barrhaven killing six people and leaving 30 injured. (BARRHAVEN INDEPENDENT FILE PHOTO/JEFF MORRIS)



A plaque for each of the victims is erected in a memorial park that includes "personal touches and tributes" at the Fallowfield park and ride.



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Saying good-bye

For many years, Barrhaven Councillor Jan Harder wrote her popular Let's Talk Barrhaven column in the Barrhaven Independent. Her column in the Oct. 4, 2013 issue of the Barrhaven Independent started with an account of the funerals of the five passengers who died in the crash.

"This is a very sad time for the Barrhaven community, especially for the family, friends and neighbours of the victims of the September 18th bus accident. And yet every day I have witnessed courage, strength and compassion in many ways from many people. Last week we celebrated five the lives of five special Barrhaven resi-

dents. Each celebration was unique, special and told us so much about who Karen, Michael, Rob, Connor and Kyle were and how much they will be missed. Thank you to all who have reached out to these families and to our community.

"I want to ask you all to reach out and support all those who took that 76 bus on that morning. They too need our support and friendship. Yesterday, we gathered again to say goodbye to OC Transpo operator Dave Woodard. We are sharing the pain of his loss with his family and friends, and co-workers at OC Transpo as well.

"Thank you so much to our first responders, our

City leaders, who continue to support all of us as they can and as we need."

The funerals took place on a Sunday afternoon at Cedarview Alliance Church in Barrhaven. What Harder didn't say in her words is how much she emotionally involved herself with the families to help them get through the tragedy in any way she could. For all of the criticism she took over a quarter century or so in municipal politics, she saw every single resident of Barrhaven as family, and that's how she treated everyone.

TSB Investigation

The TSB investigation focused on what may have happened to the bus and to



Heavy machinery and police cars were on site around the clock until the disabled and damaged train and bus were removed from the scene.

(BARRHAVEN INDEPENDENT FILE PHOTO/JEFF MORRIS)

Woodard. The TSB examined the bus at its engineering lab to try and find some answers. OC Transpo General Manager John Manconi said the bus had passed all of its safety inspections.

Ten days after the crash, TSB investigators returned to the scene to re-enact the crash. Their goal was to collect more information on what could have been factors leading up to the crash, such as the position of the sun at the exact time of the incident.

The investigation also showed that Woodard did not have any alcohol or drugs in his system. He was described by riders as a courteous and friendly driver. There had never been any issues with his abilities or health. It was reported after the crash that Woodard was a Type 2 Diabetic, but it did not affect his performance

or his day-to-day life. Some of the things examined were Woodard's schedule and his work and rest patterns. It may never be known if he was distracted by a passenger or by something else.

The investigation too more than two years. The TSB concluded that Woodard had likely been distracted by a video console he was required to monitor while driving. The screen has four quadrants and allows drivers to view the stairwell, upper level, side doors and exterior of the double decker bus.

The TSB also concluded that Woodard was also likely distracted by passengers on the lower deck discussing the availability of seating on the upper deck just before the crash took place.

Investigator Robert Johnston said at the time that the crash could have happened to any driver.

Woodard's family was happy with the conclusions and the TSB report. They said they hoped the finger pointing would stop. Woodard's wife, Terry, who celebrated her birthday with her husband the night before the crash, posted a message on Facebook.

"I want to thank everyone for their nice comments and thoughts regarding this final report," she wrote. "We all knew that Dave wasn't in the wrong. So please let him rest in peace."

Unfortunately, the finger pointing was not over. All five of the families had filed lawsuits against the City of Ottawa and Woodard's estate. The city filed a third party claim against Via Rail. Via, in turn, sued the Woodard family estate.

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The raw emotion outside Cedarview Alliance Church after the funeral for crash victim Kyle Nash exemplifies the pain that the families went through, and have had to endure for a decade while the community has moved on.

(BARRHAVEN INDEPENDENT FILE PHOTO/MIKE CARROCCETTO)

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The Memorial

Retired Barrhaven Councillor Jan Harder always wore her heart on her sleeve. Some people loved her as a councillor, and some despised her. That's the way that people are when it comes to politicians.

But you can always tell what kind of person someone is when their backs are against the wall or when there is a tragedy. Going through the aftermath of an event like the bus-train crash is not something that builds character. It is something that reveals character.

Jan Harder dedicated her professional life to the people of Barrhaven. She was at her shining best as a councillor and a person immediately after the crash and in the years that followed. She was there for the families both on behalf of the City of Ottawa and as a friend who cared. This tragedy hit her hard. Harder always set the tone for the community – a true leader. This was a time when she had to show a level of compassion that Barrhaven had never seen, and hopefully will never have to see again.

“You really have to go and

see the memorial at the park and ride,” she said in an interview in 2015. “We worked with each family to make sure that there was something special – something beyond words – for each of the victims.”

Harder was proud of that monument. It was something for the families and friends of the victims, and something for those who survived. For Harder, pouring herself into the creation of the monument seemed cathartic.

There are six areas of the park, one for each of the victims. In the middle is a black boulder with an inscription. “This memorial honours the individuals whose lives were forever changed on September 18, 2013 and is dedicated to the timeless memory of the six individuals who lost their lives. One event ... many realities.”

A plaque for each of the six victims gives a heartfelt tribute to them. It focused on them as people, how much they were loved, and the things that they loved.

“It really is a beautiful tribute,” she said. “Everyone who worked on this did an incred-

ible job.”

10 years later

We see reminders of the crash all around Barrhaven, even when we do not realize it.

There is no longer a crossing at Greenbank Road, as now the four-lane road goes under the railway tracks. There is also no longer a crossing at Cedarview Road, as the road now goes over the railway tracks.

The TSB urged that all six crossings be turned into multi-level crossings. There are still more to come. One change that people want to see changed is the crossing at Jockvale Road. Two years ago, a person on a wheelchair was struck by a train and killed at that crossing after a wheel became stuck on the track.

The changes may take more than a decade to complete, and the cost to the city is astronomical. But some day, Woodroffe Ave. the Transitway, Fallowfield Rd and Jockvale Rd. will all have multi-level crossings.

Meanwhile at the Fallowfield Station, life got back to normal. Many people have

gotten on with their lives and commute every day on the buses. Many newcomers to Barrhaven are not even aware of the tragedy that happened 10 years ago. Others who are young adults were middle school or high school students at the time and may not have fully grasped or paid attention to what happened.

Don Stewart is retired now. He was sitting on a bench waiting for the train to Toronto last week when asked if he remembered the crash.

“I wasn't here, but I certainly remember it,” he said. “I worked downtown and I used to get on the bus at about 7:15 in the morning. I was at my desk and someone came over at about 9 o'clock and they were kind of panicky and asked if I had heard what happened in Barrhaven. I didn't know. For the rest of the morning, we all sat around listening to CFRA on the radio. We just sat there with these blank expressions on our faces. Nobody said a word. I got a ride back to Barrhaven from a co-worker, and when we got to the park and ride at Fallowfield Station, there were still a lot of



The family of driver David Woodard erected a memorial for the other victims of the crash. (BARRHAVEN INDEPENDENT FILE PHOTO/JEFF MORRIS)

people around and it was very emotional. Even though we had been listening to accounts on the radio from the site of the crash, to actually go there and see the raw emotions everyone had was something I will never forget.”

It was one of those days

where everyone in Barrhaven will know exactly where they were and who they were with when they heard the news, or when they heard and felt the impact of the crash.

Nobody who lived in Barrhaven on September 18, 2013 will ever forget.



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