

Official: Safety lacking before Uber self-driving car crash

November 19 2019, by Tom Krisher



This file image made from video March 18, 2018, of a mounted camera provided by the Tempe Police Department shows an exterior view moments before an Uber SUV hit a woman in Tempe, Ariz. The chairman of the National Transportation Safety Board says Uber had an ineffective safety culture when one of its autonomous test vehicles ran down and killed a pedestrian last year in Tempe, Arizona. Robert Sumwalt said at a hearing Tuesday, Nov. 19, 2019, on the March 2018 crash that Uber didn't continually monitor its operations and it had de-activated its Volvo SUV's automatic emergency braking system. Uber's own system also didn't have the ability to brake automatically, relying on a human backup driver to do the braking. (Tempe Police Department via AP, File)

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Robert Sumwalt said at a hearing Tuesday on the March 2018 crash that Uber didn't continually monitor its operations and it had de-activated its Volvo SUV's automatic emergency braking system. Uber's own system also didn't have the ability to brake automatically, relying on a human backup driver to do the braking.

He says all companies that test autonomous vehicles on public roads need to study the crash to prevent future accidents.

Sumwalt said lessons from the crash don't just apply to Uber's Advanced Technologies Group "and they're not limited to 'something went wrong and now it's fixed.' Something went wrong, and something else might go wrong unless it's prevented," he said.

The Uber system detected the pedestrian, Elaine Herzberg, 49, 5.6 seconds before the crash. But it but failed to determine whether she was a bicyclist, pedestrian or unknown object, or that she was headed into the vehicle's path, the NTSB said. The system also did not include a provision for detecting jaywalking pedestrians, the agency said.

Instead, Uber relied on a human operator to pay attention and stop the vehicle to avoid a crash. But the company's driver was streaming a television show and looking down just before the crash. The NTSB said Uber had cameras monitoring the drivers, but it didn't do spot checks to make sure they were paying attention.

It said Uber has made many safety improvements since the crash,

including activating the braking systems, better training of human backup drivers, adding a second driver and hiring a safety director.

Herzberg was impaired by methamphetamines at the time of the crash and crossed a road in the dark away from an intersection, according to the NTSB staff.

The board will determine the cause of the crash at the Tuesday hearing and make recommendations.

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