PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD
ABBREVIATED BUS ACCIDENT REPORT

1. CASE: 8794
2. PROPERTY NAME: HTL (Coach USA)
3a. ACCIDENT TYPE: Bus Fire
3b. Accident Severity Index: 0
4a. DATE: January 13, 2006
4b. TIME: 7:25 a.m.
5. ACCIDENT LOCATION: Route 17 at Middletown
6. TOWN/CITY/BOROUGH: Middletown
7. SUMMONS: None
8. BUS NUMBER: 309
8a. YEAR: 1996
8b. MAKE: MCI
9. NUMBER OF INJURIES: 0
10. FATALITIES: 0
11. HOURS OF SERVICE: 1 hr and 40 min in last 24 hrs/37 hrs and 12 min in last 7 days
12. SYNOPSIS:

At approximately 7:25 am, Hudson Transit Lines Inc. (HTL, a Coach USA company) bus #309 traveling eastbound on Route 17 was approaching Goshen when the bus driver noticed white smoke coming from the rear of the bus. The bus driver stopped the bus in a nearest bus stop and called the dispatcher. The dispatcher advised the bus driver to “try to make it to Monroe” (the next town approximately 10 miles away). The bus driver continued on the route and while in motion he noticed that the smoke got heavier. Then he noticed flames and pulled the bus over, evacuated all passengers, called the fire department and the dispatcher, and started to spray the fire with the bus’s fire extinguisher. The local fire department responded and extinguished the fire. No injury claims were reported. The bus sustained extensive damage.

In the vicinity of the accident site, Route 17 is a two-way road divided by a full barrier yellow pavement marking. The environment did not play a roll in the accident. At the time of the accident it was daylight and the weather was dry and clear. The posted area speed limit is 55 mph.

Bus #309 is a 1995 coach bus with a seating capacity of 55 passengers. A review of the bus records indicated that Preventive Maintenance Inspections (PMI) are performed at HTL at regular 8,000 mile intervals, and the most recent was completed on November 6, 2005. The bus had traveled 2,483 miles at the time of the accident. A post accident inspection of bus #309 was conducted by the PTSB staff in conjunction with New Jersey Department of Transportation staff on January 13, 2006. The inspection of the bus showed that the bus was severely burned with extensive body and engine compartment damage. Further investigation revealed that the tag axle tires and bellows were burned as well as all plumbing for air, fuel and oil systems. The Webasto heater unit was missing the burner and blow end section with the armature for the blower motor lying on the pan over the muffler section. This could have been one of the possible causes of the fire. The engine valve cover heads were melted from the fire. The cooling system over the engine compartment was heavily damaged also, leaving the right side radiator completely burned and destroyed.

The bus driver was hired by HTL on December 28, 2001, and completed the new bus operator training program. A review of the driver’s Department of Motor Vehicles records for the last three years showed no violations or suspensions. New York State Vehicle & Traffic Law, Article 19-A records were complete and up-to-date.
A review of the driver’s HTL record revealed one preventable collision accident on 07/17/05, resulting in a warning and a classroom retraining. A post accident drug and alcohol test was not administered to the bus driver due to the nature of the incident.

In an interview with the PTSB staff the bus driver indicated that he arrived at Regional Towing at 7:00 am. Bus #309 was there and a mechanic was repairing it. Earlier the bus was driven to the shop because it would not stay running, had a low level of antifreeze, and a broken lower coolant hose upper clamp. After completing the job the mechanic released the bus. The bus driver stated that he performed the pre-trip inspection and everything was fine. The bus driver picked up 3 passengers and traveled approximately 3 miles. At 7:25 am, while approaching Goshen, NY and pulling into the bus stop the bus driver noticed white smoke in the rear of the bus. The bus driver entered the bus stop, picked up one passenger and called the dispatcher notifying him about the white smoke at the rear of the bus. The dispatcher advised the bus driver to try to make it to Monroe (approximately 10 miles). The bus driver stated that he continued on the route and while driving the smoke got heavier. A little bit later the bus driver noticed flames, stopped the bus, evacuated all bus passengers, called dispatcher and local fire department. Then he took the bus’s fire extinguisher and started to extinguish the fire. The bus driver indicated that the fire was more extensive in the left side mid section of the engine compartment. The fire department responded within 7-8 minutes and extinguished the fire.

In an attempt to find the most probable cause of the bus fire, HTL hired a private company. The company concluded that the most probable cause of the accident was an electrical shorting between power cables and the grounded left side engine mounting bracket.

The New Jersey Department of Transportation Commercial Bus Unit stated their unofficial determination that the cause of the fire was probably from the Webasto heater area, due to the end cap and motor of Webasto heater missing off the end of heater unit.

The Public Transportation Safety Board staff, after performing the investigation of the fire in conjunction with the two named above authorities, concluded that due to the extensive damage to the bus, the staff was unable to determine the most probable cause of the accident with high certainty.

Hudson Transit Lines, Inc. reviewed the accident on March 14, 2006, and found it to be non-preventable. The company determined the dispatcher did not have suitable training and lacked the knowledge to make a proper decision to evacuate immediately for this particular set of circumstances. As a result Coach USA, thru HTL, issued a directive titled “Where there is smoke there may be fire”. The directive was distributed to all drivers, dispatchers, supervisors, and maintenance personnel within the Coach USA system nationwide.
Based on the action taken by HTL regarding this accident, the Public Transportation Safety Board staff makes no recommendations.

INVESTIGATOR: Mikhail Palanker

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CHIEF, ACCIDENT INVESTIGATION SECTION  DATE

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DIRECTOR, PCSB, NYS DOT  DATE