

Supporters push U.S. Senate bill requiring seat belts on charter buses

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WASHINGTON — Safety experts, bus crash survivors and relatives of victims from last month's deadly accident in Sherman praised a Senate bill on Thursday requiring seat belts on charter buses.

But the bill's sponsors, Sens. Kay Bailey Hutchison, R-Texas, and Sherrod Brown, D-Ohio, may be running out of time to get a vote on the bill before Congress adjourns at the end of the month.

At an afternoon news conference where they were flanked by survivors and family members of crash victims, Ms. Hutchison and Mr. Brown called for the installation of safety measures like seat belts, anti-ejection glazing windows, crush-resistant roofs and flame-retardant interior in the vehicles.

The bill would also require electronic on-board recorders, improved standards for motorcoach safety inspections and improved driver training, which is currently not required by federal law.

A companion House bill sponsored by Reps. Ted Poe, R-Humble, and John Lewis, D-Ga., calls for the same measures but includes tax credits and small business grants to help bus operators pay for the changes.

After the news conference, Ms. Hutchison attended a subcommittee hearing where she asked three motor safety administrators if they could support her bill. All three said they could support the bill with a few changes and said they would work closely with Ms. Hutchison's staff to reach an agreement on it.

Ms. Hutchison said she is trying to get a hearing scheduled on the bill before the Congress recesses.

Ms. Hutchison and Mr. Brown are also running against a powerful bus lobby, which backs a House bill that calls for more studies before the safety measures in the Senate bill are adopted. The House measure is sponsored by Reps. Bill Shuster, R-Pa., and Eddie Bernice Johnson, D-Dallas.

Tammy Tran, a Houston attorney representing 36 plaintiffs from the Sherman bus crash, said she hoped the Brown-Hutchison bill would pass during this session. She said she was "disgusted" by the Shuster bill, which she said would just delay federal action and prevent the installation of the safety measures.

"When Sen. Brown and Sen. Hutchison say we need to reform this, we should act now," Ms. Tran said. "I would encourage every American to go to their senators' and representatives' Web sites and write them to support this bill."

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