Benavides v. Tesla Inc.

July 23, 2025 Trial Developments

Key Witness Testimony and Evidence (July 23, 2025)

Victims' Families Take the Stand: On Wednesday, July 23 (Day 8 of the trial), the courtroom heard emotional testimony from the family members of Dillon Angulo (the surviving victim) and Naibel Benavides Leon (the decedent). These family witnesses recounted the human impact of the 2019 crash, describing the severe injuries and losses suffered. Their accounts put a personal face on the tragedy, underscoring the catastrophic harm caused by the collision and setting the stage for Dillon Angulo's own testimony the following day. This testimony was significant to the damages aspect of the case, helping jurors understand the extent of Angulo's pain and the loss to Benavides's estate.

Tesla Engineer's Deposition – Missing Autopilot Data: The technical evidence on July 23 centered on Tesla's Autopilot system and what data it did or did not record about the crash. Jurors were shown portions of a videotaped deposition from a Tesla Autopilot software engineer (identified in earlier proceedings as Akshay Phatak). In his testimony, the engineer acknowledged that Tesla kept scant safety records in the early years of Autopilot – admitting the company did not maintain complete crash data or statistics prior to March 2018. Crucially, when pressed about this 2019 crash, the engineer had no explanation for how or why the vehicle's Autopilot data was "permanently deleted or moved." In other words, the specific Autopilot log data that might show what the car detected or did in the moments before impact was missing, and the Tesla witness could not account for its loss. This was a striking revelation for the jury – it suggested a potential evidence gap or spoliation issue, bolstering the plaintiffs' claim that Autopilot's performance was suspect and that Tesla failed to preserve critical crash data.

New Exhibits Presented: The playback of the engineer's deposition itself functioned as key evidence on July 23. Through that video and transcripts, the jury directly heard Tesla's own employee discuss Autopilot's data limitations. Additionally, the plaintiffs highlighted internal data (or the lack thereof) showing Tesla did not track Autopilot vs. manual driving crash rates in early years. No other major new exhibits (such as physical evidence or documents) were reported as introduced on July 23 beyond what had already been presented in prior days. However, by giving the families' testimony and the engineer's deposition on the same day, the plaintiffs juxtaposed the human story with the technical failures, a combination likely aimed at strengthening their case for liability and punitive damages.

Arguments by Counsel and Judge Bloom's Rulings (July 23, 2025)

Plaintiffs' Emphasis: Plaintiffs' attorneys on July 23 continued to drive home their theory that Tesla's Autopilot was defective and failed to prevent the crash. Throughout the trial, they argued that Autopilot should have detected the stop sign, the parked Chevy Tahoe, and the pedestrians, and either warned the driver or braked autonomously. The fact that the Tesla "did nothing" – no alert, no emergency braking –

is, according to plaintiffs, evidence of a design defect and inadequate warnings. The missing Autopilot data became a point of argument as well. Plaintiffs suggested that the absence of crash log data was convenient for Tesla and prevented a full accounting of Autopilot's failures. They implied to jurors that Tesla either lost or destroyed critical data, an argument enhancing the credibility of their claims that Autopilot malfunctioned.

Tesla's Defense: Tesla's counsel, for their part, maintained that the sole cause of the accident was human error by driver George McGee – not any Autopilot defect. On July 23, Tesla's lawyers cross-examined the family witnesses carefully, striving to show sympathy while gently reinforcing that McGee's distracted driving (reaching for a dropped phone) was the tragic trigger. They also likely reminded jurors that McGee had manually pressed the accelerator, which overrode Autopilot's speed limit and any automatic braking. This data point – that the driver's foot was on the gas pedal just before impact – was emphasized to argue that Autopilot was effectively disengaged by the driver's actions. In response to the missing-data issue, Tesla's attorneys downplayed it, suggesting there was no nefarious intent – perhaps the data was simply corrupted in the crash or never recorded due to system limits. (Indeed, an earlier Tesla service technician had testified that he tried to download the car's Autopilot log after the crash but found the file "corrupted," an issue he attributed to his lack of expertise.) Tesla's team argued that regardless of what any missing log might show, the undisputed facts – the driver's distraction and override of Autopilot – break the chain of causation, absolving Tesla of liability.

Mid-Trial Motions and Rulings: July 23 also brought some courtroom drama unrelated to the evidence. One juror was dismissed that day after it came to light they had made social-media posts about Tesla CEO Elon Musk. Judge Beth Bloom, concerned that the juror's posts revealed a possible bias or preconceived view of Tesla/Musk, removed that juror from the panel. An alternate juror was seated in their place, and Judge Bloom cautioned the remaining jurors to avoid any outside information or discussion of the case. This incident underscored the high-profile nature of the trial – Musk's persona and public opinions about him were hovering in the background, even though he is not a party in the case. By excusing the juror, Judge Bloom ensured the jury would remain impartial and focused only on the evidence presented in court.

Earlier in the trial, Judge Bloom had shown a willingness to let key evidence in and keep the trial moving. For example, she had denied Tesla's attempts to exclude parts of the Autopilot engineer's deposition on trade-secret grounds, allowing the jury to see the portions discussing Tesla's lack of safety data tracking. By July 23, it was evident that Judge Bloom was allowing robust presentation of evidence from both sides – technical data, expert opinions, and personal testimonies – while also carefully managing trial fairness (as seen with the juror issue). There were no reported oral rulings on dispositive motions that day; notably, Tesla did not succeed in any bid to halt the trial at this stage. (The company's earlier summary judgment motion had already been largely denied in June, permitting the design defect and failure-to-warn claims – and a punitive damages request – to go before the jury.) Any routine motions on July 23 (such as objections during testimony) were handled by Judge Bloom on the fly, generally in favor of a full airing of the facts. For instance, when attorneys on that Wednesday morning sparred over whether evidence of a past Tesla Autopilot recall could be mentioned, the judge prompted them to reach a stipulation off the record – demonstrating her practical approach to resolving evidentiary disputes and avoiding undue delay.

New Evidence/Exhibits and Docket Filings on July 23, 2025

Evidence to the Jury: Aside from the witness testimony and deposition video described above, no dramatically new physical exhibits were noted on July 23. Much of the critical evidence (crash scene photos, vehicle data readings, expert analyses, etc.) had already been introduced on prior days. However, July 23's proceedings pulled together threads from earlier in the trial. The videotaped deposition of the Tesla engineer effectively became an exhibit, highlighting internal data (or lack thereof) about Autopilot's safety record. Additionally, any demonstrative aids – such as transcripts of the 911 call or body-cam footage of the driver's post-crash statements – had been presented previously (jurors already knew that McGee exclaimed "I wasn't looking... I dropped my phone" right after the crash). On this day, the plaintiffs' case neared its conclusion, so the evidence presented was aimed at solidifying liability: the human stories of loss, and Tesla's own admissions about its technology. No new expert reports or high-tech simulations were introduced on the 23rd; the focus was on live testimony and the deposition as narrative evidence.

Docket Filings on July 23: According to the official court docket, July 23, 2025 was recorded as a day of jury trial proceedings (with a minute entry noting that the trial was held and witnesses testified). There were *no substantive motions or orders filed on that date* in the case, aside from the routine trial log entries. In other words, the parties did not file any new pleadings, and Judge Bloom did not issue any written orders on July 23 that appear in the public docket. All significant developments from that day occurred in open court (as reported by journalists and observers) rather than on paper. The docket reflects that the trial had commenced on July 14 and continued day-by-day; a retrieval of the docket on July 23 shows the trial in progress but does not list any new document filings on that specific date. (Any motions in limine or pre-trial orders had been entered in the weeks prior, and an attempt by Tesla to end the case early – likely a Rule 50 motion for judgment as a matter of law at the close of plaintiffs' evidence – would have been made orally and was not granted, as the trial pressed on to the defense phase.) In sum, July 23's updates come from courtroom reporting rather than new docket filings, and the day's events were memorialized in the trial transcript and minutes rather than in any new written motion or ruling.

Significance of the July 23 Developments

The happenings on July 23, 2025 had important implications for the trial's trajectory. The family testimonies added compelling human impact evidence that could sway the jury during deliberations on damages (especially relevant if the jury were to consider punitive damages). The Tesla engineer's deposition, revealing missing Autopilot data, directly fed into the plaintiffs' narrative that Tesla's technology was unreliable and that the company had not been transparent about its safety. This could undercut Tesla's defense by suggesting that if even Tesla cannot fully explain what Autopilot did or didn't do (due to lost data), the jury might infer that Autopilot failed in this instance.

Judge Bloom's removal of the juror demonstrates the court's diligence in ensuring a fair trial – it neutralized a potential appeal issue (bias in the jury) and signaled to the remaining jurors the seriousness of focusing only on the evidence. With an alternate juror stepping in, the trial continued uninterrupted, avoiding a mistrial scenario.

By the end of July 23, the plaintiffs were wrapping up their case-in-chief. The next day's plan (July 24) was for Dillon Angulo himself to testify, likely as the capstone witness to describe his firsthand experience of the crash and its aftermath. The developments on July 23 set the stage for that testimony: jurors now had both technical context and personal context fresh in mind. They had heard a former NHTSA advisor call Autopilot "defective" (the week prior), they learned Tesla's data practices were questionable, and they

saw the profound human toll. All of this would inform how jurors interpreted Dillon's testimony and, ultimately, how they apportioned responsibility between the driver and Tesla.

In summary, July 23, 2025 was a pivotal trial day marked by impactful witness accounts and a notable evidentiary point about missing Autopilot data. Counsel for both sides used this evidence to reinforce their themes – plaintiffs highlighting Tesla's alleged technology lapses and misplaced trust, and Tesla doubling down on driver negligence. Judge Bloom's steady handling of the juror issue and evidentiary disputes kept the trial on track. While no new court filings emerged that day, the courtroom events significantly advanced the narrative heading into the final phase of this closely watched trial.