Benavides v. Tesla Inc.

July 24, 2025 Trial Developments

In-Court Proceedings on July 24, 2025

Witness Testimony: On Thursday, July 24, 2025, the plaintiffs concluded their case with emotional testimony from Dillon Angulo (the surviving boyfriend) and Neima Benavides (sister of the decedent). Angulo told the jury about his late girlfriend, 22-year-old Naibel Benavides Leon, describing her as "just a light" who brought joy to everyone around her. He recounted the devastating impact of her loss and expressed deep guilt: "This loss has been devastating to me… The fact that I pulled over there, that I didn't bring her back to her family, it's been very hard for me". Angulo also detailed the constant pain and PTSD he endures from his injuries – explaining that even during ordinary activities "out of nowhere, this fear comes over me, like something bad is going to happen". Neima Benavides likewise testified about the "hole" left in their family by Naibel's death. These heartfelt accounts were aimed at showing the human impact of the crash – evidence supporting the plaintiffs' claims for significant compensatory (and potentially punitive) damages.

Cross-Examination by Tesla: Tesla's attorney, Hilarie Bass, aggressively cross-examined both Angulo and Neima Benavides to challenge their credibility and highlight inconsistencies. Bass confronted them with the fact that they had previously filed lawsuits against the Tesla's driver, George McGee, alleging reckless driving and blaming him for the crash. On the stand, both Angulo and Neima acknowledged that at the time of those earlier suits, they did not know McGee had been using the Tesla's Autopilot feature – information they learned later. Neima explained that once they discovered Autopilot was in use, "we understood that we had two components in this accident: we had the driver and we had the car too". This exchange was significant: it allowed Tesla's counsel to underscore that the plaintiffs initially blamed only the human driver, arguably raising questions about whether Tesla's Autopilot is a "newly found" target of blame.

Bass also pressed Angulo about how he had spent money received after suing McGee. She pointed out that in the years following the crash, Angulo made large personal purchases – including two boats and a waterfront property in the Florida Keys – using proceeds from his prior settlement with McGee. By eliciting these facts, Tesla's lawyer implied that Angulo had already been compensated for his suffering (diminishing his financial hardship) or even suggested he might have a financial motive in the case. This line of questioning was clearly designed to undermine Angulo's credibility and reduce juror sympathy, by portraying him as someone who, despite claiming lifelong trauma, was able to buy luxury items.

Transition to Tesla's Defense: After these witnesses, the plaintiffs effectively rested their case, and the trial pivoted to Tesla's defense. Indeed, it was reported that Tesla began presenting its defense on the afternoon of July 24 once the plaintiffs' testimony was finished. (Typically, at the close of a plaintiff's case, the defense will move for a directed verdict; although no explicit report of such a motion is in the public

sources, Judge Beth Bloom evidently denied or reserved any such motion, as the trial proceeded with Tesla calling its own witnesses.) With the jury having heard the plaintiffs' side, Tesla's team was now set to put on evidence to counter the allegations.

Judge Bloom's Role in Court: No extraordinary rulings or remarks by Judge Beth Bloom were highlighted on July 24. Judge Bloom presided over the proceedings, managing objections and ensuring the trial stayed on track. There were no news reports of any new judicial orders or dramatic interventions in open court that day – suggesting that the testimony and cross-examination unfolded routinely under the judge's supervision. (Notably, earlier in the trial Judge Bloom had ruled the courtroom would remain public despite Tesla's concerns about trade secrets, and had allowed the jury to consider punitive damages based on evidence of potential recklessness. By July 24, the jurors were aware that they could award punitive damages if warranted, which raised the stakes for Tesla.) On July 24 itself, however, Judge Bloom's role was largely to rule on objections on the fly and facilitate the transition to the defense case. No new written rulings were issued from the bench that day, aside from her implicit ruling allowing the case to proceed to the defense phase once she determined the plaintiffs had presented sufficient evidence to go to the jury.

Key Legal Arguments Highlighted

The courtroom developments on July 24 reinforced each side's core legal arguments:

- **Plaintiffs' Theory – Autopilot Defect & Failure to Warn:** Through the testimony of Angulo and cross-exam responses, the plaintiffs underscored their claim that Tesla's Autopilot system was defectively designed and marketed. They argue that Tesla "overhyped" Autopilot's capabilities, leading consumers to believe the car could effectively drive itself more than it truly could. In particular, the plaintiffs contend Tesla should never have allowed Autopilot to be engaged on roads like Card Sound Road in Key Largo – a two-lane roadway where the fatal crash occurred – because Autopilot was designed for divided highways and was not safe for that environment. They fault Tesla for not geofencing or otherwise restricting Autopilot's use to appropriate roads, and for failing to implement adequate driver-monitoring safeguards to ensure drivers remained attentive. In short, by July 24 the plaintiffs had painted a picture for the jury that Tesla put profit and technological allure over safety, creating a system that invited misuse. They maintained that if Autopilot had worked as advertised – by warning the driver or automatically braking – this tragedy could have been avoided. This argument was bolstered by McGee's own testimony (earlier in the week) that he expected Autopilot to save him: on Monday, McGee testified he took his eyes off the road to pick up a dropped phone, believing Autopilot would handle the upcoming stop. Thus, by the end of July 24, the jury had heard that Tesla's product may have lulled the driver into a false sense of security – a central premise of the plaintiffs' case.

- **Tesla's Defense – Driver Error as Sole Cause:** Tesla's legal team countered by driving home the argument that this crash was caused entirely by human error, not by any defect in Autopilot. Through cross-examination and anticipated defense testimony, Tesla emphasized evidence that Autopilot was not active at the moment of impact and had functioned properly by trying to alert the driver. Specifically, Tesla points out that George McGee was speeding (~61 mph in a 45 zone) and ran multiple traffic signals (flashing red lights and a stop sign) because he was distracted by

2

his phone. Critically, Tesla says that by pressing the accelerator pedal to speed, McGee overrode the Autopilot's cruise control, causing the system to display a message that it would not brake in those conditions. In other words, according to Tesla, Autopilot had already disengaged due to the driver's input, and the vehicle did issue at least five safety alerts in the 10 minutes before the crash – alerts McGee allegedly ignored. All of this supports Tesla's position that no vehicle could have prevented the crash given the driver's recklessness, and that Autopilot cannot be blamed for what was essentially a distracted driving accident. On July 24, Bass's questions about the prior lawsuit (where the plaintiffs initially blamed McGee alone) dovetailed with this theory – suggesting that the first instinct of everyone, including the plaintiffs, was to fault the driver, and that only later did they shift focus to Tesla when looking for deeper pockets. Tesla's counsel also reminded the jury (and elicited agreement from witnesses) that McGee faced consequences: he settled the victims' lawsuits and pleaded no contest to careless driving (with a minimal criminal penalty). This underscored Tesla's stance that accountability lay with McGee, not the car. By the close of July 24, Tesla was preparing to reinforce this defense with its own witnesses (likely Tesla engineers or experts) to testify that Autopilot was not defective and that McGee's misuse of the car was unforeseeable.

In summary, the clash of narratives was clear by the end of July 24: the plaintiffs argued Tesla built a semi-autonomous driving feature without proper safeguards or warnings, which in part contributed to the death of an innocent bystander, while Tesla argued the feature was used improperly by a negligent driver and that no defect in Autopilot caused the crash. Both sides' legal arguments were sharpened through the day's testimony and cross-examinations, setting the stage for the defense case to continue in the following days.

Evidence and Exhibits Introduced to the Jury

July 24 saw new evidence presented to the jury primarily through witness testimony and impeachment material on cross-examination:

- **Emotional Impact Evidence:** The testimony of Angulo and Neima Benavides itself served as powerful evidence of damages. Their descriptions of Naibel's character and the family's loss, Angulo's ongoing medical struggles, and his trauma gave the jury a tangible sense of the harm suffered. While not physical exhibits, these first-hand accounts are evidence that support the plaintiffs' claims for pain, suffering, and loss of companionship. Such evidence is crucial for jurors when later calculating compensatory damages, and it can influence their view on punitive damages by illustrating the real-world consequences of the alleged product failures.

- **Prior Lawsuit Admissions:** Through Bass's cross-examination, Tesla introduced evidence that both plaintiffs had previously accused the driver (McGee) of reckless driving in separate lawsuits, effectively treating McGee as the sole party at fault initially. This likely involved referencing the complaints or sworn statements from those earlier cases (which are part of the public record). By highlighting these admissions, Tesla put before the jury the fact that the plaintiffs' story evolved – i.e., they did not immediately blame Autopilot at the outset. While the witnesses explained that they lacked information about Autopilot until later, the jury now had this prior inconsistent

position as evidence. The significance of this evidence is to potentially undermine the plaintiffs' theory: jurors might question whether Tesla is truly at fault or whether, absent knowledge of Autopilot, even the victims themselves saw it as a straightforward case of driver negligence. In legal terms, these prior allegations against McGee could be used by Tesla both to impeach credibility and as substantive evidence that McGee's actions were initially viewed as the proximate cause of the crash.

- **Financial and Character Evidence:** Another piece of new information was the disclosure of Angulo's post-accident purchases (two boats and a waterfront house) following his settlement with the driver. Bass brought this out to the jury, likely by using financial records or deposition testimony to confirm the purchases. This can be viewed as impeachment evidence – intended to challenge Angulo's portrayal of his suffering and financial needs. It suggests that Angulo has been made financially whole to some extent (at least by the prior settlement) and might subtly hint that his pursuit of Tesla could be financially motivated. While the relevance of how Angulo spent his settlement money is debatable, Judge Bloom evidently allowed this line of questioning, meaning the jury heard it and could consider it when assessing Angulo's credibility. The exhibit (if any) associated with this – for instance, a record of property purchase – was not explicitly described in reporting, but the information itself became part of the trial record via Angulo's answers. The import of this evidence is tactical: it doesn't directly bear on whether Autopilot was defective, but it could sway jurors' attitudes toward the plaintiff (positively or negatively) when deciding damages.

- Accident and Autopilot Data: Although July 24's focus was on human testimony, the jury had by this point also seen technical and accident evidence in prior days that remained relevant. For example, earlier in the trial an expert witness (for the plaintiffs, engineer Alan Moore) testified about Autopilot data and how McGee would "reset" Autopilot after warnings to keep it active. The jury learned that Tesla's own logs showed multiple alerts and that Autopilot was used on a road it wasn't designed for. By July 24, Tesla had not yet called its tech witnesses (that would happen once their defense started), but through cross-exam Tesla reiterated some of that evidence: e.g., the fact that Autopilot was effectively off because the accelerator was pressed and that warnings were issued. Any exhibits like crash scene photos, vehicle data printouts, or diagrams would likely have been introduced through earlier witnesses or would come in with Tesla's witnesses; none were specifically introduced on July 24 aside from what was covered in testimony. However, jurors on that day did hear references to Autopilot warning messages and the system's design limitations (no geofencing, reliance on user attention) as part of the narrative. All of this constitutes evidence that the jury would later deliberate on – some of it favorable to Tesla (e.g. the warnings and disengagement), some favorable to plaintiffs (e.g. Autopilot being used where it arguably shouldn't be).

In sum, the new evidence on July 24 came mainly through words – the heartfelt stories of loss and injury, and the pointed admissions elicited on cross. These pieces of evidence were crucial in framing the stakes of the case: the personal tragedy at the center of it, and the question of who or what is ultimately responsible. No flashy new exhibits (like videos or new expert analyses) debuted that day, but the context

provided by testimony and cross-examination sharpened the evidentiary picture for the jury. By the end of the day, jurors had both the emotional human context and several concrete factual points (previous lawsuits, Autopilot usage details, etc.) to weigh as they moved into hearing Tesla's side.

Significance of the July 24 Developments

The events of July 24, 2025 marked a pivotal juncture in Benavides v. Tesla Inc.:

- The plaintiffs' case culminated with powerful personal accounts, solidifying the emotional gravity of the case before the jury. This was critical for laying the groundwork for damages (including punitive damages).

- Tesla's team used cross-examination to punch holes in the plaintiffs' narrative, emphasizing prior admissions that the human driver was to blame and subtly questioning the plaintiffs' motives and consistency. This foreshadowed Tesla's upcoming defense and gave jurors reason to scrutinize the plaintiffs' claims of defect.

- No new legal theories were introduced on July 24, but the day highlighted the existing legal battle lines: product defect vs. driver negligence, corporate responsibility vs. personal accountability. Judge Bloom's earlier rulings (allowing the case to go forward on design defect/failure-to-warn and punitive damages) meant the jury would ultimately have to decide if Tesla's conduct was merely unfortunate or legally culpable to a reckless degree. The testimony on July 24 directly fed into that decision – showing the devastating outcome and probing whether that outcome stemmed from Tesla's choices or solely the driver's choices.

- The lack of new filings or orders on that date underscores that the case was fully in the jury's hands (fact-finding mode) at this stage, rather than being fought on legal technicalities. All major evidentiary disputes had been settled in prior rulings (e.g. which prior incidents and reports could be mentioned), and July 24 was about persuading the jury with facts and testimony, not arguing law to the judge.

- Finally, the commencement of Tesla's defense that afternoon signaled a turning point: for the first time in the trial, Tesla would put up its own witnesses to rebut the plaintiffs. This transition, facilitated by Judge Bloom on July 24, set the stage for the remaining trial days. The jury was about to hear Tesla's side of the story directly, starting presumably with Tesla engineers or experts to explain Autopilot's design and to assert that the system was not at fault. Thus, July 24 was effectively the bridge between the plaintiffs' case and the defense case.

In conclusion, the courtroom developments on July 24, 2025 – from the heartfelt witness testimony and pointed cross-examinations to the legal arguments stressed and the procedural milestone of the plaintiff resting – were crucial in framing the issues for the jury. They provided the emotional and factual climax of the plaintiffs' presentation and immediately ushered in Tesla's rebuttal, all without any extraneous docket activity. What happened in court that day will heavily inform the jury's deliberations, as the trial moves toward a verdict on whether Tesla's Autopilot is partly to blame for the tragic 2019 crash.