

Benavides v. Tesla Inc.

Weekend Developments (July 19–20, 2025)

- **Judge’s Evidence Ruling:** On Sunday, July 20, the presiding judge (U.S. District Judge Beth Bloom) issued an order limiting what evidence the jury can hear about other Tesla Autopilot-related crashes. Specifically, the judge barred the plaintiffs from using NTSB investigation findings of other Tesla crashes, citing federal law that NTSB reports cannot be used to advantage any party in a civil trial. However, the court did allow the jury to learn about other Autopilot-involved crashes in a general sense – but only to the extent they might show Tesla was on notice of Autopilot’s defects or dangerous conditions (without relying on NTSB conclusions).
- **Expert Testimony Recap:** Media coverage over the weekend highlighted pivotal testimony from the prior week. One key witness was former NHTSA safety advisor Mary “Missy” Cummings, who testified for the plaintiffs that Tesla’s Autopilot was “defective” because the company knowingly allowed the car to be operated in conditions for which Autopilot was *not* designed – a decision she believed Tesla made “as a way to sell more cars”. This testimony underscored the plaintiffs’ theme that Tesla’s marketing of Autopilot led to driver overreliance.
- **Tesla’s Response & Driver Focus:** Tesla’s attorneys pushed back against such testimony by noting Cummings’ potential bias (highlighting that she had been hired and paid as an expert in previous lawsuits against Tesla). Over the weekend, Tesla’s legal team also reiterated their central argument that the human driver was at fault in the 2019 crash. They pointed out that the driver had his foot on the accelerator at the moment of impact – which would have overridden Autopilot – and emphasized that Autopilot is intended for use only with a fully attentive driver keeping hands on the wheel. In Tesla’s view, the tragic outcome resulted from a distracted driver, not a malfunction of Autopilot.

Courtroom Proceedings on July 21, 2025

- **Driver’s Testimony of Overreliance:** On Monday, July 21, the Tesla driver, George McGee, took the stand and gave important testimony about the moments leading up to the crash. McGee acknowledged that he was wrong to reach down for a dropped cell phone while the car was on Autopilot, and he warned of the danger of putting too much faith in Tesla’s technology. “I trusted the technology too much,” McGee said, explaining that he “*believed that if the car saw something in front of it, it would provide a warning and apply the brakes.*” This admission supported the plaintiffs’ claim that Tesla’s marketing of Autopilot can lull drivers into a false sense of security.

- **Dashcam Video Evidence:** As part of McGee’s examination, jurors were shown a dashcam video of the April 2019 crash. The footage, played in open court on July 21, showed McGee’s Model S driving through a stop sign at ~62 mph, launching off the end of a road and striking a parked Chevrolet Tahoe, which then hit the victims. The graphic video had a palpable impact in the courtroom – McGee appeared visibly shaken when confronted with the footage. He pinched his lips, shook his head, and softly said “No” when asked if he had ever seen those crash images before. This emotional moment underscored the severity of the accident and the consequences of the driver’s lapse in attention.
- **Tesla’s Cross-Examination:** Under cross-examination, Tesla’s attorney sought to firmly place responsibility on McGee. The attorney asked whether McGee had ever contacted Tesla for additional training on Autopilot or its safety features (he had not), and highlighted McGee’s familiarity with the route (he had driven that road dozens of times). McGee ultimately conceded that it was his own duty to watch the road and apply the brakes when necessary, regardless of Autopilot. This line of questioning bolstered Tesla’s argument that the accident resulted from driver error, not a vehicle defect.
- **Tesla’s Post-Trial Statement:** After Monday’s court session, Tesla released a public statement summarizing McGee’s testimony in its favor. Tesla noted that McGee “stated the simple truth that we all know” – namely, that if *“he had just paid attention to the road instead of searching for his dropped cell phone and pressing the accelerator — which he was doing for over a minute before the crash — this tragic accident would never have happened.”* In other words, Tesla emphasized that the crash was preventable had the driver not misused the car and Autopilot. This official statement underscored Tesla’s defense that Autopilot was not to blame.
- **Plaintiffs’ Counterpoint:** Plaintiffs’ counsel, during re-direct questioning, seized the chance to reinforce their theme that Autopilot encouraged McGee’s complacency. They pointedly asked McGee if he would have taken his eyes off the road to grab his phone had he been driving a regular car without Tesla’s Autopilot engaged. McGee answered, “I don’t believe so.” This exchange suggested that it was indeed his trust in Autopilot’s capabilities that made him comfortable enough to look away from the road. It was a crucial moment for the plaintiffs, highlighting their argument that Tesla’s system and messaging contributed to the driver’s dangerous overconfidence.

Each of these developments from July 21’s trial proceedings — the driver’s frank admissions, the dramatic video evidence, Tesla’s vigorous blame-shifting, and the plaintiff team’s rebuttals — provided a vivid picture of the core dispute for the jury. The trial continued beyond that Monday, with the jury set to deliberate on whether Tesla bears partial liability for the fatal crash (including a potential punitive damages claim that the judge had allowed to go forward).

Disclaimer:

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