

Independent Accident Reconstruction Team Sought In Fatal Bus Crash

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The attorney representing a Glastonbury teenager involved in a fatal school bus crash in January plans to ask the state's attorney to hire an independent accident reconstruction team to review the accident.

"The fact it seems the state police want to arrest only my client and ignore the fact the school bus driver was illegally driving the bus makes me want to suggest that the state's attorney's office needs to hire an independent reconstruction team," Hartford attorney Salvatore Bonanno said Friday.

Bonanno was referring to a Courant story earlier this week that said state police submitted an arrest warrant weeks ago to Hartford State's Attorney Gail Hardy seeking to charge Bonanno's client, Christopher Toppi, with causing the accident that led to the death of 16-year-old Vikas Parikh of Rocky Hill.

The driver of the school bus was Paul Burns, whose privilege to drive a school bus was suspended by the Department of Motor Vehicles after the crash because he wasn't qualified to drive the bus he was operating.

Hardy could not be reached for comment Friday. Bonanno acknowledged that it is unlikely Hardy will circumvent the state police and hire an independent reconstruction team. It is unclear what charges state police are seeking against Toppi or why Hardy's office has not signed the arrest warrant.

Sources said at least one of the insurance companies involved in the case has hired its own accident reconstruction team, although no one outside of law enforcement officials has been allowed to see the school bus or the car involved in the fatal crash.

The crash happened about 8 a.m. on Jan. 9, when a school bus carrying a teacher and 16 students from the Greater Hartford Academy of Mathematics and Science was heading west on I-84 toward Farmington to watch a video showing the kickoff of a robotics competition.

The bus and the Volvo operated by Toppi collided between exits 46 and 45. Sources said both vehicles had passed a Honda in the middle lane, with Toppi in the passing lane and Burns in the far right lane.

The collision occurred when both Toppi and Burns were trying to move back into the middle lane, sources said. The bus careened through a guardrail on the north side of the highway and plunged down an embankment, according to a police report.

Parikh died of blunt traumatic head injury. At least four other students on the bus suffered serious injuries.

Burns has asked the DMV to postpone any hearing on his school bus license until the criminal investigation is completed. He is licensed to drive school buses that weigh up to 26,000 pounds and carry 15 or fewer people, including the driver. The bus he drove that day weighed 29,800 pounds and had 18 people on board.