

Veolia officials can't yet meet with Metrolink crash victims

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WASHINGTON — Victims of a deadly Metrolink train crash near Chatsworth will not get a chance to tell their stories this week to the French transportation company whose contractor was operating the commuter train.

Officials with Veolia Transportation notified Rep. Elton Gallegly on Monday that they won't be available to meet with him and the crash victims and their families on Thursday. The meeting has now been canceled, Gallegly said.

"I'm not real happy right now," said the Simi Valley Republican, who had set up the meeting.

"The largest company of its kind in the world didn't have one individual available between golf and whatever else they were doing this week; maybe it was polo," he said sarcastically.

Veolia owns Connex Railroad, the contractor operating the Metrolink commuter train when it slammed head-on into a Union Pacific freight train on Sept. 12, 2008. Twenty-five people, most of them from Ventura County, were killed and more than 100 injured.

Federal investigators concluded the accident was caused by a train engineer who ran a red light while sending text messages on his cell phone. The engineer, Connex employee Robert Sanchez, was among those killed.

Gallegly's office asked last Friday that Ron Hartman, executive vice president of Veolia's rail division in the United States, meet with the train crash victims and their families.

Hartman said he was scheduled to be out of the office but would see if someone else from the company could attend. On Monday, Gallegly said he got a letter from the company's attorney, Alan Moldawer, and chief lobbyist, Tim Gillespie, saying no one would be available until after Feb. 7 because of "various circumstances."

Gallegly said he had a hunch what the company meant by "various circumstances."

A federal judge is to decide Feb. 3 whether to finalize the company's offer to set up a \$200 million settlement fund for the train-crash victims. "They are not willing to sit down with the folks prior to the trial date being resolved," Gallegly said.

Moldawer said in a brief interview that Veolia has offered to meet with Gallegly in February and has suggested several dates. "We just couldn't do Thursday, and we told the congressman that," he said.

Veolia later issued a statement saying it has worked "nonstop" with Metrolink and the state and federal courts to put aside pending litigation from the crash and provide the victims and their families "a prompt and fair financial recovery from this tragedy."

"The \$200 million fund, now ready for allocation and distribution, is the largest financial recovery in the history of passenger rail," the company's statement said.

The settlement, if approved by the court, would limit Veolia's liability in the crash to \$200 million, the maximum that train crash victims are allowed to receive under federal law. The train crash victims and their families argue \$200 million would come nowhere close to covering all their claims for medical bills and other expenses.

Gallegly introduced legislation in Congress last week that would raise the liability cap to \$275 million.

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