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Editorial

Commuters Beware

The train wreck last summer that killed nine commuters and injured 80 in the nation's capital laid bare a deadly paradox: the safety failures at the heart of the collision occurred on a subway track devoid of the strong federal crashworthiness standards in place on Amtrak's immediately adjacent railroad line. Regional systems of light-rail and subways are not subject to the federal government's more stringent safety requirements.

The Obama administration wisely wants to end this disjunction by proposing that Congress extend federal standards to subway and light-rail lines now haphazardly regulated in more than two dozen city and regional systems. The safety rules and monitoring are shockingly toothless in too many jurisdictions, with the systems averaging less than one overworked safety worker.

The Washington accident happened on the second-busiest subway line in the nation. It is theoretically monitored by a tri-state committee that was found, however, to have no regulatory authority or enforcement workers.

Under the administration's approach, the safety of subway and light-rail lines could remain under the jurisdiction of local authorities only if they agreed to upgraded equipment and monitoring standards set by the Department of Transportation. The alternative would be direct federal regulation. Federal money already subsidizes subway and light-rail growth, and it

should be cut off to systems that cling to risky standards.

The government was barred from regulating subways and light rail in 1965 when home rule was a priority. But new systems have boomed since then, along with collisions and derailments. The National Transportation Safety Board has warned about the dangers for decades.

The choice for Congress is stark: Improve safety on light rail and subways, or wait for the next train wreck.

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