

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA  
NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD  
OFFICE OF ADMINISTRATIVE LAW JUDGES

\* \* \* \* \*  
In the matter of: \*  
\*  
METROLINK TRAIN NO. 111 \*  
COLLISION WITH UNION PACIFIC \*  
RAILROAD LEESDALE LOCAL, \* Docket No.: DCA-08-MR-009  
September 12, 2008, \*  
Los Angeles, California \*  
\* \* \* \* \*

Interview of: ROBERT ATKINSON

National Transportation Safety Board  
Courtroom  
1515 West 190th Street  
Gardena, California

Wednesday,  
November 5, 2008

The above-entitled matter came on for interview  
pursuant to notice.

BEFORE: JIM REMINES

## APPEARANCES:

JIM REMINES, Operations Group Chairman  
National Transportation Safety Board  
Washington, D.C.  
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I N T E R V I E W

## INTERVIEW OF ROBERT ATKINSON

BY MR. REMINES:

Q. You got an address I can reach you at, Bob?

A. Address, you can have it all;

, Winnetka, California.

Q. How you spell that?

A. W-i-n-n-e-n-e-t-k-a. I think that's right.

Q. I'll double check.

A. Unit No. 5 --. It's a big town home. It's a four-bedroom town home. You don't see too many of those. Two thousand square footer.

Q. Let me call you Robert -- or Bob?

A. Either way. Bob will be all right.

Q. How do you spell your name?

A. Bob, it's B-o-b. Atkinson, A-t-k-i-n-s-o-n.

Q. Okay.

MR. REMINES: My name is Jim Remines, R-e-m-i-n-e-s.

Wayne Workman?

MR. WORKMAN: W-o-r-k-m-a-n.

MR. NARVELL: And Rick Narvell, N-a-r-v-e-l-l.

BY MR. REMINES:

Q. Okay. Bob, my name is Jim Remines, and I'm going to ask you a couple of questions, and we're here to learn what you know about the Metrolink accident that happened on September

1 the 12th?

2 A. I remember -- I didn't see the accident itself.

3 Q. Okay?

4 A. I -- I didn't see the accident itself. I left  
5 just -- we got up to the light. I said, "That's it. He's  
6 going through the tunnel first." Bam, because I knew there was  
7 a freight train coming because we hadn't seen it, yet.

8 Q. Okay. I understand you have information to offer us  
9 that you may have that you saw the other day. Could you  
10 describe your day here at the station on September the 12th  
11 before the accident and what happened?

12 A. Well, I was here at the station. I was talking to  
13 Rob. We're talking about baseball, about the Dodger game  
14 against, I think it was, Colorado, whoever was playing that  
15 weekend. I'm not sure.

16 He said, "Well, if they keep it going, we'll get in  
17 the playoffs." Sure enough, they won that night. The last  
18 words I said to Rob that day, I said, "I'll see you Monday."  
19 He said, "I'll see you." Took off.

20 I got up. I was sitting on the bench on that second  
21 shed, you know. I looked down there. I said, "Well, he got  
22 the green light so far." I waved to Bob, you know, the  
23 conductor. He waved at me. That's the last time 'cause he  
24 always waved at me once in a while.

25 And so as soon as the train got beyond the cross

1 Devonshire, I just stayed right there, wait, see the lights go  
2 green all the way.

3           And the first thing I was telling Chris -- I was  
4 talking to Chris -- I says -- the last thing I remember telling  
5 him, "I guess he's got the green light to go through the tunnel  
6 first before the freight train gets here" 'cause I knew it was  
7 coming through eventually about that time of day. They always  
8 do about right around 3:00 o'clock or so -- the freight  
9 train -- and we haven't seen it yet. I figured he was running  
10 late.

11         Q.    What time did you get here?

12         A.    That particular day I got -- I was here -- around  
13 3:00 that day.

14         Q.    And Rob -- that was -- was that the engineer of  
15 the -- you said you spoke about the ball game. Was that the  
16 engineer of the Metrolink train?

17         A.    The engineer Rob, Robert was his full name, but we  
18 always called him Rob.

19         Q.    How long had you known him or got to --

20         A.    I would say about approximately about a year.

21         Q.    Um-hum.

22         A.    Because he was always so nice to me. He said, "How  
23 are you doing today?" I said, "Just fine." That's how I got  
24 started 'cause I use to sit there all the time. And so they  
25 kept talking about little topics, things like here and there

1 and there, different things like baseball or football or  
2 whatever. And I remember one time -- well, it's back November,  
3 last November.

4 I went to -- I was going to Colorado. He said, "Well  
5 that's where I started at." I said, "Oh, you did?" I didn't  
6 know that until he told me. He said, "Where you going in  
7 Colorado?" I said, "In Denver." I said, "I'm going on the  
8 California Zephyr."

9 I went to Martinez and went to Reno -- Reno to Denver.  
10 I had fun sitting there in Reno. That's a unique station I  
11 ever seen. Well, I remember it used to be on level ground at  
12 one time, not anymore. I don't know how they set that station  
13 up there.

14 Q. Did you notice anything that day of the accident  
15 about Sanchez's behavior, or did he look normal to you?

16 A. He looked normal to me that day. He wasn't -- he  
17 wasn't doing anything -- anything different.

18 Q. Was he on the phone or anything like that?

19 A. I didn't see any phone or anything on him. I didn't  
20 even know he had a cell phone.

21 Q. Did you see him?

22 A. I shouldn't say that because I remember one time -- I  
23 remember one time he -- was it that kid used to sit right next  
24 to me once in a while. Mark, his name was. He gave him a  
25 phone number one time. I remember that.

1 Q. Was Mark here much or?

2 A. That -- little -- that young kid -- that young  
3 kid -- he's only a middle school student, I think. And I  
4 remember Mark -- Mark always had a cell phone with him all the  
5 time. He used to always talk on it or his buddies or whatever  
6 it is, and so I can remember that. That, I can remember.

7 Robert gave him the phone number one time. I guess  
8 that's how it got started. I don't know. I have no idea. I  
9 have no idea about texting or anything. I had no idea when  
10 this texting jazz started. But I do know I did not see -- that  
11 particular day, I didn't see him have a cell phone in his hands  
12 or anything.

13 Q. Did you see anybody else on the locomotive with him?

14 A. I didn't see anybody else that day.

15 Q. Did he communicate with the conductor any while you  
16 were there or --

17 A. Well, I tell you what I heard. I think the conductor  
18 said something. I heard the intercom in the engine "Okay.  
19 Proceed."

20 So Rob went like this "I got to go." I said, "Okay.  
21 Catch you later. I'll see you Monday." That's the last thing  
22 I said to him.

23 Q. Do you think the intercom was the conductor in the  
24 rear? Did you see the conductor?

25 A. I know -- I know Bob always carried that phone with



1 him in his hands. He's always had it, that phone. He plugs it  
2 in every time, each car, I guess. And I notice he does that  
3 all the time. He always has that phone in his hand. I seen  
4 him do that.

5 Q. What prompted you to look at the signal? Was there  
6 anything unusual that would have prompted you to look?

7 A. Just the last car.

8 Q. No. I'm talking now about the signal ahead, the  
9 green signal that you said you saw?

10 A. You mean signal?

11 Q. The signal?

12 A. No. I think -- I think he --

13 Q. Oh, he took it over the radio?

14 A. -- took it over the phone, yeah.

15 Q. Let's go back to when he left. Did you say you went  
16 to the side and looked and you could see towards Topanga?

17 A. Yep.

18 Q. And what did you see?

19 A. Well, as soon as they cross -- what I saw -- well,  
20 when I waved to Bob, I wait till he gets across Devonshire. I  
21 wait till they go down further near that green light, the  
22 signal. It was green all the way, so I made that remark. I  
23 guess you got to go through the tunnel first because I remember  
24 that.

25 Again I'm gonna repeat -- I knew there was a freight

1 train coming somewhere. But I didn't say anything to Robert  
2 about that or anything.

3 Q. Um-hum.

4 A. I did not. I just -- I figured he might have known.

5 Q. How clear was the signal that you could see up there?  
6 I mean visually. Could you see it clearly? Was it --

7 A. Yeah. I saw it pretty clearly. It was green all the  
8 way, and it was still green when he got up to the point.  
9 That's when I say -- I said, "That's it. I'm going to go."  
10 And I left.

11 First thing, you know, I went -- I was going down  
12 Devonshire. I saw these fire trucks going by, and I said,  
13 "What the hell is this?"

14 And I went back. I turned around and came back, and  
15 I said -- I saw Chris and Chris -- both of them standing right  
16 near there. I said, "What is that smoke over there?"

17 He said, "It's a train crash." I said, "Huh?" I  
18 said, "It can't be because he was up to the point, and the  
19 light was green as heck."

20 I remember we all agreed with that. It was green. I  
21 said, "Chris, wasn't that light green down there?" He said,  
22 "Yes, green." So I said, "Okay."

23 But like I -- like I said to you once, it was a  
24 strange day because I know it was 775 came in. Amtrak was  
25 coming in northbound. I noticed that the signal down this end

1 was red and red. Usually, it's always maybe amber or maybe red.  
2 It wasn't that way that day they came in. It was red and red.  
3 I said, "What?" So I turned around, and see what track it was  
4 coming in on. It was green on that light down there.

5 Q. Um-hum.

6 A. And I -- I said I guess he's coming on Track 1. So  
7 the northbound came in on Track 1. The 775 -- that was -- that  
8 was a strange one. I never seen that happen before.

9 Q. What made it strange?

10 A. Well, I tell you there's the two red lights there.  
11 I -- I didn't know which track he was coming in on, so I had to  
12 turn around and look down there to see which -- see what color  
13 that signal was, so I knew it was Track 1.

14 Q. Because the signal down at the other end was green?

15 A. It's green. But that was red, and that was red and  
16 both of them. Usually, I can tell which a -- which track  
17 they're coming in on?

18 Q. Um-hum?

19 A. One says, "Blue, blue 775 coming on Track 2," very  
20 rarely. That happened last week one day.

21 Q. Uh-huh.

22 A. They came out on Track 2 because they were running  
23 way late that day. Metrolink was in here. Metrolink was  
24 coming in so they -- put him on Track 2, all northbound.

25 Q. The passengers -- did you see any passengers around

1 that day that you remember?

2 A. No.

3 MR. REMINES: I'm going to turn the questions over to  
4 Mr. Workman, then.

5 BY MR. WORKMAN:

6 Q. Okay. Bob, back to the signal --

7 A. Yes.

8 Q. In your experience here, have you ever seen that  
9 signal green when there was no train here?

10 A. Yes. Five or ten minutes prior before train time, I  
11 have.

12 Q. Okay. Have you seen -- have you seen any other  
13 signals?

14 A. Yes, I have. I've seen amber blinking.

15 Q. Blinking amber?

16 A. I've seen that.

17 Q. Okay. And can you -- can you see the red from  
18 the -- from the station?

19 A. Yes.

20 Q. Okay. On the day -- on the day of the accident, did  
21 you notice the signal before the train arrived?

22 A. The only signal I noticed -- I knew was coming in,  
23 was 4:16. Actually, he came in early. He came in, like, 4:14  
24 that day. And I looked down there. I see it was green this  
25 way. I looked both ways, you know, this way, and I said, "He's

1 coming in." Amber light this way he came on in. He stopped  
2 right in front of that third car -- third car and stopped.

3 Q. Now, when he came in, let's go back south, you know,  
4 of the station. You -- you could see -- you could see a signal.  
5 Was that for Number 1 or Number 2 track?

6 A. I could see both of them before he comes down. I can  
7 see it once in a while on the other side.

8 Q. Um-hum?

9 A. I can, but not too often.

10 Q. Okay?

11 A. Because the car height -- they block your view, you  
12 know, if you look that way.

13 Q. Yeah. So when -- before he got here, you looked back,  
14 and you see an amber on Number 1?

15 A. No, I did not. I saw a -- I saw a red light  
16 and -- and an amber on this side on the northbound.

17 Q. So amber on the northbound, which would be Number 1  
18 track?

19 A. A green actually. I'm sorry -- Amber and then amber  
20 and then red on the other side.

21 Q. Okay. So on the northbound or Number 1 track, you  
22 saw amber?

23 A. Right.

24 Q. And on the southbound, or Number 2 track, you saw  
25 red?

1 A. I saw red.

2 MR. WORKMAN: Okay. All right. That's all I have.

3 BY MR. NARVELL:

4 Q. Bob, I just have just a couple questions about the  
5 weather on the day of this accident. Can you recall what the  
6 weather conditions were?

7 A. I'm sorry, I didn't --

8 Q. The weather. Do you remember what the weather  
9 conditions were on that day?

10 A. It was warm that day.

11 Q. Was it clear? Sunny?

12 A. It was clear.

13 Q. Okay. In times past when you looked down that signal,  
14 have you ever seen it shimmering or wavering because of heat  
15 or --

16 A. No.

17 Q. -- fog or haze?

18 A. Not really.

19 Q. Whatever -- whatever it was, it was always clear?

20 A. It was normal to me.

21 Q. Okay.

22 A. Just like it's stationary, just stationary. I knew  
23 it had an awful lot of winds out here, but sometimes I wonder.

24 Q. Right.

25 A. But I ain't never seen that signal shake or anything.

1 Q. That's what I'm saying -- and how about looking at it?  
2 Any brown?

3 A. No. The only time I saw -- just like I said, I seen  
4 amber blinking. That's about the only thing I can see, to be  
5 honest with you. That's the only time I seen that thing  
6 lightly, you know, blinking.

7 Q. Whatever it was, it was always you could see it  
8 clearly whatever the signal is?

9 A. I could see it real -- pretty clear.

10 Q. Okay. Very good. That's all I have.

11 A. Some days -- some days, I always wondered when it  
12 gets real dusty out here, I would say it could be very hard to  
13 see. It can be dusty out there sometimes.

14 Q. What about that day? Was it dusty?

15 A. No. It was clear that day. It was clear that day.  
16 It was a little bit windy, but not much. Light, very light  
17 wind, I remember that.

18 Q. Okay. All right. Thank you.

19 A. You welcome.

20 MR. WORKMAN: Go ahead.

21 BY MR. REMINES:

22 Q. Do you have anything else to add that you -- that we  
23 haven't asked you?

24 A. I can't think of anything else. Actually, the  
25 accident I thought about a lot of things. I said, you know,

1 it's like everybody concerned about that signal way down there.  
2 You know, I'm surprised it's way down there. I'm surprised  
3 they don't have one right here at Devonshire Street because  
4 it's a lot closer, and I would say it would be a better factor.  
5 I think it's too far down. And I think that thing was too  
6 close to that switch.

7           Sometimes I always wondered about that. That can be  
8 scary, you know, get right there near a switch on a curve. You  
9 don't know what the hell you're going to see. 'Cause I always  
10 think, if the engineer's on this side of the cab, well, there's  
11 nobody on the other side. I wonder if he could see his way in  
12 the tunnel or not.

13           I never -- I've been thinking about that. I always  
14 wondered about that myself. That UP engine -- I'm surprised  
15 they threw the brakes on in time. The amount of time they  
16 had -- that's a very short distance before that switch out of  
17 the tunnel. That's just like a shot out of a cannon.

18           Q.    When -- let me ask you a question. When you say the  
19 signal on Number 1 south of the station was amber, was 111  
20 already in the station, or had it arrived yet?

21           A.    No. There was nobody else here.

22           Q.    And the other signal on Track 2 was red?

23           A.    Right.

24           BY MR. WORKMAN:

25           Q.    How long before 111 arrived did you notice that amber



1 signal?

2 A. Well.

3 Q. And red on two?

4 A. I hadn't noticed -- it's very funny. As soon as  
5 those -- I can hear the train whistle right near De Soto, and I  
6 noticed that's when the train come in. That's when the light  
7 changes right there.

8 Q. So when you saw the amber and you saw the red, did  
9 you look down the tracks?

10 A. Yes, I did. It was green down there.

11 Q. And it was green down there. Okay.

12 A. It's the opposite way. When I -- when the southbound  
13 comes in, it's green one side, or green on the other side, or  
14 whichever.

15 Q. Okay.

16 MR. WORKMAN: No more questions.

17 MR. NARVELL: No more questions.

18 MR. REMINES: No more questions.

19 This will close our interview, and thank you for  
20 helping us out.

21 (Off the record.)

22 (On the record.)

23 INTERVIEW OF ROBERT ATKINSON

24 BY MR. REMINES:

25 Q. All right. Say your name one more time, Bob.

1           A.    What's that again?

2           Q.    What's your name?

3           A.    Bob.

4           Q.    Bob what?

5           A.    Atkinson, A-t-k-i-n-s-o-n.

6           Q.    Okay, Bob.  Jim Remines is here.  Wayne Workman is  
7 here.  Rick Narvell's here.

8                    We want to ask you about those signals one more time,  
9 and what we want to talk about is to the south of the station,  
10 if you're facing south, the signal on the left-hand side was  
11 the night of the accident --

12          A.    It was red.

13          Q.    And the signal on the right, which is the Number 2  
14 track?

15          A.    It was yellow.

16          Q.    Yellow.

17                   MR. WORKMAN:  Okay.

18                   MR. REMINES:  Okay.  Thank you.

19                   (Whereupon, the interview in the above-entitled  
20 matter was concluded.)

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22

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24

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the attached proceeding before the  
NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

IN THE MATTER OF: METROLINK TRAIN NO. 111  
COLLISION WITH UNION PACIFIC  
RAILROAD LEESDALE LOCAL,  
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Interview of Robert Atkinson

DOCKET NUMBER: DCA-08-MR-009

PLACE: Gardena, California

DATE: November 5, 2008

was held in accordance with the record, and that this is the  
original, true and accurate transcript which has been compared  
to the recording accomplished at the interviews.

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Willie Anderson, Jr.  
Court Reporter