

Case: Metro Transit: Driver Shot, Bus Flies Off a Bridge

It was November 26, the day after Thanksgiving, 1998. Dan Williams, media relations specialist for Metro Transit in Seattle (a division of the King County Department of Transportation), was preparing to take his children to an afternoon movie when the phone rang. It was a reporter from the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* asking if Williams knew anything about an accident involving a bus on the Aurora Bridge (see Figure 13.1).

Williams had been with the county agency for 15 years, 12 as media relations specialist in the office of the director of Metro Transit. He was one of only two media relations specialists who reported to Ron Posthuma, assistant deputy director of Metro Transit, who reported to Director Paul Toliver.

Williams first thought that the call was routine. In a city where buses are so crucial, accidents happen. Metro Transit had 1,600 full-time drivers and 750 part-time drivers. Also, it was after 3 p.m., peak traffic hours. Approximately 1,000 buses are in operation during peak hours, most of them heading into or away from the downtown area. Because of the holiday weekend, traffic was somewhat less congested. Williams told the reporter he hadn't heard anything, but promised to get back to him. It also was not unusual to get calls about accidents from reporters because newsrooms regularly monitor (police) radio scanners.

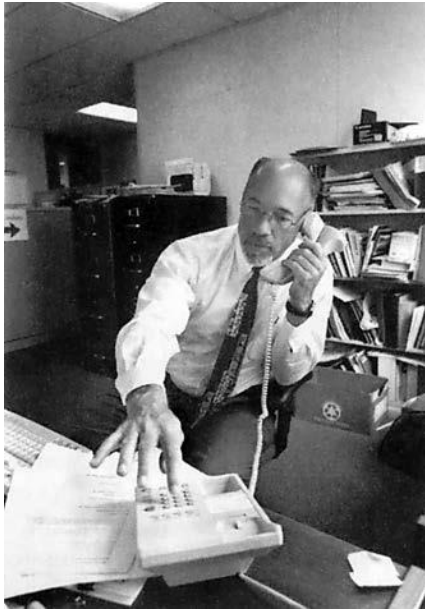


Figure 13.1 Dan Williams, media relations specialist for Metro Transit, served as primary spokesperson during the 1998 bus tragedy, in which a Metro bus driver was shot and the bus plunged off Aurora Bridge in Seattle. Reprinted with permission of Dan Williams.

“I called our control center not really expecting anything out of the ordinary,” said Williams.

“Our coordinators have a lot of people to notify in case of an accident, and they must also communicate by radio to personnel at the scene of the accident. Calmly, the coordinator told me that the driver of a bus southbound on Aurora Avenue had been shot, the bus veered off the bridge, the driver had been ejected and was receiving medical treatment on the roof of a building where he fell, and there were multiple injuries to passengers.”

Aurora Bridge is one of the tallest bridges in Seattle, a city of bridges. It is commonly called Suicide Bridge because it is the bridge of choice for people who want to take their own lives.

There were so many suicide jumps from the Aurora that the news media stopped covering them for fear that the victims, through jumping, were seeking a strange kind of publicity or fame. The

bridge is also part of Aurora Avenue, a major thoroughfare connecting the northwest section of the city to the downtown area. On both ends, the bridge spans houses and other structures; in the center, it towers 175 feet above Lake Union (see Figures 13.2 and 13.3).

After learning of the accident, Williams said:

My immediate reaction was to suppress whatever shock I was beginning to feel and do whatever was necessary to get to the scene as soon as possible. I made a quick call to neighbors and dropped my kids at their house. Television news helicopters were circling the accident scene, just a half mile from my house. I didn't call the reporter right away because I didn't have enough information.

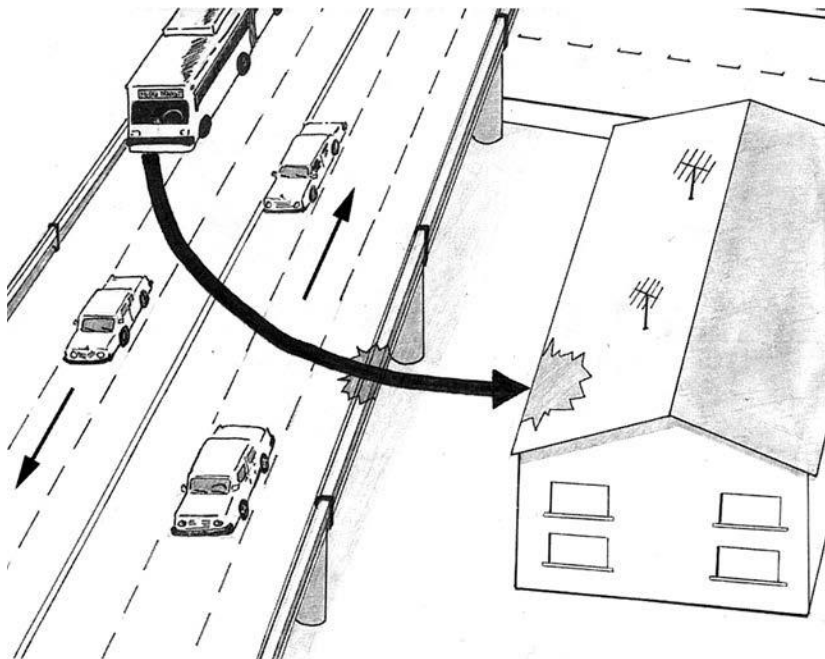


Figure 13.2 Sketch of route of bus headed over the bridge embankment. The 60-foot Metro Transit bus was traveling southbound toward downtown Seattle when a passenger in the front of the bus shot the driver. The bus then swerved into oncoming traffic on Aurora Bridge, crashed

through a guardrail, and plunged about 45 feet, striking the roof of an apartment building before coming to rest on the front lawn of that building. The driver, the assailant, and another passenger died of injuries. Drawing by Gina Arnold. Reprinted with permission.

Williams arrived at the scene about 30 minutes after the time of the accident. He described the scene as follows:

The bus was resting upright in the front yard of a house. Emergency medical crews were removing victims from the bus and laying them on blankets and stretchers under the bridge; two or three of the most severely injured had already been taken to hospitals. The rest were being evaluated and treated at the scene. The bus driver was still receiving treatment on the roof of the house [where he had landed]. The Seattle Police Department had taped off the area, keeping media and onlookers about a block away. Detectives were beginning their investigation.



Figure 13.3 The 40,000-pound Metro Transit bus broke into two after it fell from Aurora Bridge in Seattle. Three people died and 29 passengers were injured, some seriously. Fortunately, no one on the ground was injured. Reprinted with permission from the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*.

Williams learned that an assailant had shot the bus driver, sending the southbound 60-foot-long (so long it bends in the middle), 40,000-pound bus across oncoming northbound traffic, traffic that would have been heavier at that time of the afternoon had it not been for the holiday. The bus crashed through two sections of iron and concrete guardrails and shot through the air, temporarily landing on top of a two-story apartment building near the bridge, where the driver was ejected. But then the bus bounced off the roof and broke in two: The front part of the bus landed on the steps of the apartment building, and the back part landed upright on a front lawn.

The driver, 44-year-old Mark McLaughlin, died of his injuries. The assailant apparently died of a self-inflicted bullet wound, but his identity was not known until the next day. The 33 passengers had various injuries; one later died of his injuries. Miraculously, no non-passenger was injured. The Friday following Thanksgiving is normally a “slow news day.” Very few events, press conferences, or speeches are scheduled because many people take the day off as part of a 4-day Thanksgiving weekend. Newscasts usually consist of soft news and features; it’s a good day for public relations professionals to get their video news releases aired. But this was not a typical holiday weekend. Soft news, features, and video news releases were bumped by this breaking news event. Because the combination of a shooting, an accident, a bus off a bridge, and relatively low loss of life was so unusual, the story was carried by news outlets all over the United States. The accident occurred at 3:15 p.m., and shortly thereafter local television news operations began covering the accident with live breaking news reports. Some stations preempted regular broadcasting and were on the air continuously through their evening newscasts. After the network news programs (some of which also ran the story), the local stations returned to air more live coverage from the scene.