

## Safety adviser criticizes Southwest, Midway

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CHICAGO - Chicago and Southwest Airlines for years have "carelessly ignored" the risks of short runways and insufficient over-run areas at Midway Airport, an expert on transportation disasters said yesterday in a report on last week's fatal accident.

The crash was avoidable, and the outcome would have been much worse if fuel tanks on the plane ruptured and caught fire, said Gunnar Kuepper, chief of operations at Emergency & Disaster Management Inc., a Los Angeles-based company that advises government agencies and private businesses on emergency-planning strategy.

"This was not a surprising risk for anyone in the aviation industry," Kuepper said. "Surely it was a surprise for the people on the street outside Midway Airport who collided with a Boeing 737."

For a fraction of the financial losses that Chicago and Southwest will pay out from the accident, he said, the city and its major airlines at Midway should have invested in safety systems to minimize the damage of a plane skidding off a runway. The Southwest flight landed in a snowstorm last Thursday at Midway, slid off the runway, crashed through barriers and hit several cars. A 6-year-old boy in one car was killed, and 10 people were hurt.

"Midway chose not to address and mitigate the apparent hazard. ... Southwest did not seem to care about reducing the risk either," said Kuepper's 35-page report.

The report cited similarities to a 2000 accident in which a Southwest plane overran a runway in Burbank, Calif., in rainy weather and crashed into two cars on a street. After the accident, the Burbank Airport improved its safety areas at the ends of runways by installing pits of soft concrete that will crush under a plane's to arrest momentum.

"Eighty percent of this expense was covered by an FAA grant," Kuepper said.

"One might expect that such a large carrier" as Southwest "would pressure Chicago's Aviation Department to provide excellent safety measures at Midway," he said.

"Southwest Airlines and many airports have been lucky so far," he said. "But luck can run out easily."

Southwest spokeswoman Linda Rutherford said the airline and all carriers at Midway "partner on any enhancements that are made" through the charges the airlines pay to the airport.

Chicago airport officials say they are working with the FAA on a plan to comply with a 2015 federal deadline to improve runway safety areas.

Meanwhile, Southwest officials disputed reports that said the captain of the Southwest plane that crashed at Midway violated company policy by using the plane's autobrakes.

Investigators with the National Transportation Safety Board have said the autobrakes were used in the maximum power setting and that they helped the pilots stop the plane.

"You can also manually brake an aircraft under any circumstances, which is Southwest's policy," said Southwest spokeswoman Beth Harbin. "But autobrakes are standard equipment on our aircraft."

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