

Suit in Fatal Van Accident Is Settled for \$2 Million

Chrysler Admits No Fault in Beltway Crash

By Eric L. Wee
Washington Post Staff Writer

Chrysler Corp. will pay \$2 million to a Woodbridge woman who said a defect in the driver's seat of a minivan caused the accident that killed her husband in 1992.

Allynne L. Baird sued the carmaker in Prince William County Circuit Court last year for \$5 million, saying her husband, George Baird, lost control of his 1987 Plymouth Voyager after his seat collapsed backward. Chrysler denied that the seat design was faulty but agreed to pay the \$2 million in an out-of-court settlement finalized this week.

"I have mixed emotions," Baird said. "I think it was a fair settlement, but you can't replace someone with money. What's important is [that] there's a problem with their car, and with this settlement, I feel, [Chrysler] acknowledged that. I want to get out to people that the vehicle isn't as safe as people think."

George Baird, a 48-year-old computer consultant, was exiting the Capital Beltway and about to head south toward Woodbridge on Interstate 95 when the accident happened. The suit said a pickup truck traveling 27 mph hit Baird's van from behind as he slowed in traffic.

According to the suit, Baird's seat fell backward and he was unable to navigate the van as it drifted into another lane and was hit by a truck.

"We still believe it's a negligently designed seat system which fails at low-impact [speeds] so the driver becomes helpless," said Charles Zauzig, Baird's attorney. "There's a problem, and we hope eventually Chrysler will do something to rectify it."

Tony Cervone, a spokesman for Chrysler's engineering and technology section, said that there is nothing wrong with the seat and that the company has no plans to recall any Voyagers. He said Chrysler decided to settle because it would have been difficult to explain the complexities of the seat back's strength to a jury.

"The seats and seat systems were, are and continue to be state of the art," Cervone said. "They meet and exceed any of the federal requirements for front seats. Instead of having a long, litigious battle, the corporation felt it was better to settle."

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration investigated Chrysler minivan seats in 1990 after receiving several complaints. The probe ended after the automaker showed that it had met federal standards.

Baird said she will divide the settlement with her three adult children.

Chrysler Corp. reaches \$2 million settlement

Woodbridge woman blamed seat in husband's death

By MIKE FUCHS
Manassas Bureau

MANASSAS — A Woodbridge woman who blamed a faulty driver's seat for causing an accident that killed her husband reached a \$2 million out-of-court settlement with Chrysler Corp. Thursday.

Allynne L. Baird sued the automaker in August 1994 for more than \$5 million in compensatory damages.

The suit blamed George Nelson Baird's death in September 1992 on his being unable to control the 1987 Voyager van after his seat collapsed backward.

The seat collapsed after the van was rear-ended on the Beltway, according to the suit.

Though Chrysler agreed to the settlement, a company official said Thursday the van exceeded federal safety standards.

George Baird, 48, was traveling south on the Beltway when traffic came to a sudden stop near Interstate 95, according to police. A tractor trailer was unable to stop in time and hit the

back of a pickup truck, which then plowed into the rear of Baird's van, police said.

Baird lost control of the van and crashed after the seat fell backwards, according to the suit.

"This was a poorly designed seat system," said Charles Zauzig, Allynne Baird's attorney, during an interview at the Prince William-Manassas courthouse Thursday.

Allynne Baird could not be reached for comment Thursday.

Lindsay Brooke, a spokesman for Chrysler's engineering and technology branch, said the van and other vans made since 1987 exceed all design requirements.

"We disagree with [Zauzig's] statement that the seat is poorly or inadequately designed," Brooke said Thursday. "To the contrary."

There are no plans to recall the vans to check the seats, he said.

"Our seats from 1987 to the present continue to exceed all existing design requirements in the industry," Brooke said.

Chrysler decided not to challenge the suit in part because it would be too difficult explaining complex safety measures and the dynamics of the accident to a jury, Brooke said.