

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

Chrysler Admits No Fault in Beltway Crash

By Eric L. Wee

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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.

Allyne 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.