

# Attorneys: Jury finds driver, DOTD shared the blame for 2009 crash that killed an Israeli woman

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GONZALES — A unanimous Ascension Parish jury found a driver and the state highway department shared the blame in a May 2009 crash at the Burnside/Interstate 10 interchange in Gonzales that killed an Israeli mother of five, attorneys said.

The jury awarded \$1.05 million to the surviving husband and five children of Noha Salama, 49, of Tel Aviv, Israel.

The state Department of Transportation and Development must pay about \$250,000 for its share of the judgment and legal interest, plaintiffs' attorney Christian Shofstahl estimated.

Though jurors found driver Mohamed Abu-Jaber 82 percent liable, he won't have to pay because the claims against him and other individual defendants were resolved before this week's trial, Shofstahl said. Salama was a passenger in Abu-Jaber's vehicle.

The jury found DOTD 18 percent liable, court minutes say.

Abu-Jaber had exited I-10 westbound at the Burnside exit, stopped at stop signs at the end of the off-ramp and then went across the four-lane divided highway. Two vehicles in the far southbound lanes hit Abu-Jaber's car on the passenger side as he was trying to get back on I-10 westbound, according to pretrial filings. Salama was killed.

Plaintiffs' attorneys Shofstahl and William Cass had argued during the two-day trial at the 23rd Judicial District Court in Gonzales that DOTD violated state law and a national traffic sign guideline in the way stop signs were placed around the westbound I-10 off-ramp at La. 44.

They claimed DOTD had been required to put a yield or stop sign in the median for traffic trying to cross La. 44 from the westbound off-ramp because of the median's width.

DOTD attorneys and representatives on the stand disputed this assertion, saying stop signs were only required at the off-ramp, where they were located, and blamed Abu-Jaber for not yielding to oncoming traffic.

Several years after the crash, DOTD installed traffic lights at the request of the developers of the nearby Edenborne project, who paid for the lights.

Shofstahl and Laura Gerdes Colligan, state Attorney General's Office spokeswoman, both said this week they are reviewing Wednesday night's verdict. The Attorney General's Office represented DOTD.

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