

Median barrier to boost safety

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By **Dena Levitz** | *Staff Writer*

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Median barriers are by no means miracle workers.

Transportation planners say a divider would not have prevented Sunday's horrific accident along Bobby Jones Expressway entirely, given the speeds and size of the truck involved.

Still, the hope is that a new project that will add a concrete barrier on Bobby Jones and widen the busy expressway will prevent future wrecks, according to Georgia Department of Transportation spokeswoman Vonda Everett.

The project is not a response to Sunday's fatal crash in which Augustan Larry Skinner sped across the median and literally flew into a half-dozen other vehicles, killing four including himself.

But the tragedy illuminates an ongoing issue - the growing volume of cars speeding along the highway.

Ms. Everett said planners saw the need for the upgrades within the past year and put the project on the books at that time.

What's scheduled is the addition of a concrete barrier designed to prevent cars from crossing the divide, as Mr. Skinner's pickup did.

"The barrier will improve safety by eliminating vehicles from crossing over the median into opposing traffic," DOT District Preconstruction Engineer George Brewer said.

"If a car were to head into the median, the barrier would deflect them back onto their side of the interstate."

The cost of the project will come to about \$9 million. Ms. Everett said besides constructing the barrier, workers will widen the roadway to three lanes on each side between Gordon Highway and Deans Bridge Road, where Sunday's wreck occurred.

That the project is classified under the governor's Fast Forward program means the time frame for completion will be sped up, with construction set to start three years from now rather than five or 10.

Also locally, the DOT is midway through a project to construct a cable median barrier along 30 miles of Interstate 20 between Warren County and the Richmond County line. It's just one of several median projects under way statewide, Ms. Everett said.

For years, South Carolina has been ahead of the curve when it comes to barrier success stories.

According to a Federal Highway Administration report by Richard Powers, of the Office of Safety, before South Carolina's big push for median barriers, more than 70 people died in 57 interstate median crossover crashes in 1999 and 2000.

After the installation of more than 300 miles of median cables on South Carolina interstates, nearly 2,000 vehicles were stopped from crossing the medians, and the number of comparable fatalities dropped to eight over the next three years.

FHA spokesman Doug Hecox said study after study has shown that barriers work in reducing accidents, yet it's impossible to pinpoint exactly how many lives are saved.

"Every accident is the result of a thousand different things, and one of these things just happened to go wrong," he said. "Engineers' jobs is to put enough mechanical devices in place so that they can trip up that one variable from happening. Then the accident can be prevented. That's what barriers do."

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By The Numbers

267: Americans killed in freeway crossover crashes in 2001

740,000: Roadway departure injury crashes annually

3: Times more severe median crashes are than other highway crashes

1: Number per 200 freeway miles of crossover fatalities that occur nationally

Source: Federal Highway Administration

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