

Local News

MnDOT to install barriers on I-94

By **Mackenzie Ryan**

maryan@stcloudtimes.com

Crews this month are installing a cable barrier on the Interstate Highway 94 median near Opportunity Drive in the hopes that it will save lives.

It's one of at least six segments on the interstate between St. Michael and the Todd County line where the Minnesota Department of Transportation is installing high-tension cable barriers, which will prevent cars from crossing the median into oncoming traffic.

Crews will install 11.3 miles of cable on the interstate. This is a \$1 million safety project that is part of a larger \$3 million initiative to line 32 miles of median from St. Cloud to St. Michael by 2008.

Four thumb-sized cables will be woven between poles along the median, a relatively new concept that has prevented semi-trucks from crossing into oncoming traffic, said Tom Dumont, assistant district traffic engineer with MnDOT.

"There is no other safety device available that virtually guarantees consistent success in saving lives every year on the interstate system," said Gary Dirlam, district traffic engineer with the MnDOT.

Engineers are discussing extending the barrier west of St. Cloud in 2009, but they first want to install the barriers in the higher-trafficked areas, Dumont said.

A recent study found that 78 crashes that went over the median led to deaths and 118 crashes led to serious injuries from 1984 to 2004, he said.

The study area extended from the Crow River bridge to the Todd County border. That includes two fatal crashes near Opportunity Drive last year, where crews are constructing the barrier, Dumont said.

"With the newer vehicles and people keeping their speeds a little bit higher and driving on what I would call adverse conditions, the vehicles are engineered so well that people have a tendency to keep their speeds up," Dumont said. "I think we're seeing more of an increase of through-the-median, head-on crashes."

The cable barrier is expected to prevent one fatal crash and serious injury crash per year, he said.

Cables will be connected by poles about 10 feet apart. The cables will be between 19.5 inches and 28 inches off the ground, and they will deflect and help stop cars or trucks that hit it.

But one concern is maintenance cost. The barrier is expected to receive five hits per mile per year, and the cost to repair each hit can range from \$500 to \$1,000, Dirlam said.

With at least 32 miles of barrier to be put in, it could cost \$80,000 to \$160,000 to repair each year.

"It is a significant cost, but from a society standpoint, when you look at the benefit it provides ... the benefit gravely exceeds the cost," Dirlam said.

Cable locations

Here's a look at where cables will line the Interstate Highway 94 median in the next few years:

! Minnesota Highway 24 to Stearns County Road 75.

! Minnesota Highway 238 interchange in Stearns County.

! U.S. Highway 71 interchange in Sauk Centre.

! Minnesota Highway 25 interchange in Monticello.

! West of Wright County Road 37 in Albertville.

! Between Wright County Road 37 and Minnesota Highway 241 in St. Michael.

Heads up

Drivers should watch for intermittent left-lane closures during off-peak hours as crews work in the center median, said Jenny Seelen, spokeswoman for the Minnesota Department of Transportation.

Crews will continue until restricted by weather and resume installation in the spring.

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