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Missouri strings cable barriers along I-70 median

'Fatalities happen when crossover accidents occur'

By KEVIN MURPHY
The Kansas City Star

Once Cheryl Treasure lost control of her car, nothing could stop it from skidding through the Interstate 70 median and into the path of a tractor-trailer near Boonville, Mo.

Treasure, a Columbia area resident who recently had moved from Kansas City, died two weeks ago after veering off a stretch of road that did not have barriers in the median.

Missouri, hoping to reduce such accidents, is stringing steel cables on 165 miles of I-70 between Kansas City and St. Louis in one of the most extensive uses of such barriers nationwide.

"I definitely think it would have made a difference," said Joy McBee, sister of Treasure, whose 10-year-old daughter, Jennifer Alspaugh, also died in the crash. "It probably would have saved their lives."

The Missouri Department of Transportation is spending some \$50 million on barrier installations that will be finished on I-70 and some other highways statewide by the end of next year. Barriers have previously had limited use, such as on Interstate 435 in east Kansas City.

"We are working very hard to try to stop fatalities," said Tom Evans, traffic engineer for the department's Kansas City district office. "Fatalities happen when crossover accidents occur."

The barriers already are producing results, state officials said. Deaths and injuries from crossover accidents dropped the past two years on I-70 and declined on I-435 after barriers were installed there several years ago, data show.

Nearly all rural stretches of I-70 that have medians of less than 60 feet — the large majority of the interstate — will have cable barriers. About 54 miles, mostly between Sweet Springs and Columbia, are still to be done. Most urban parts of I-70 have concrete barriers.

In addition to I-70, cable barriers are planned for Interstate 44, Interstate 29 from Kansas City to St. Joseph and perhaps parts of Interstate 35 and other interstates in the Kansas City region, Evans said.

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Missouri is among only a handful of states to invest significantly in cable barriers, according to Evans and the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials, in Washington. Other states include Oklahoma, Arizona, Oregon, Washington and North Carolina.

"The experience has been considered good — especially from a public safety perspective — where they have been used," said Jennifer Gavin, spokeswoman for the association.

Kansas uses concrete barriers on urban interstates and on the turnpike. Most rural interstate stretches in Kansas have medians at least 60 feet wide, so cable barriers are not used, officials said.

Barrier drawbacks

The cable barriers are not without drawbacks and critics. The barriers are expensive to maintain and repair, do not always prevent crossovers, damage vehicles that slide into them in relatively minor incidents and limit the ability of police and emergency vehicles to cross medians.

The cables are strung between metal posts about 33 inches high. They are designed to snag vehicles in their front wheel wells and restrain an SUV or a smaller vehicle, Evans said. They are flexible, therefore less dangerous to strike, than a concrete barrier, he said.

"It doesn't guarantee no crashes, but it does greatly reduce them," said Jeff Briggs, a Missouri transportation department spokesman.

The department did a study of barriers used on I-435 in Kansas City and on I-44 in St. Louis, comparing three years of accident data before the barriers were installed to two years afterward — 2001 and 2002.

Briggs said the study found that fatalities from crossover wrecks dropped by two-thirds to three-fourths, although wrecks doubled because of collisions with the barriers.

"While crash rates have gone up, the severity of those crashes has gone way, way down," Briggs said.

There also has been a downward trend in fatal accidents on I-70 since 2003, when the barrier construction project began in earnest. Last year, 14 persons died in crossover accidents and 109 were injured, according to the Missouri Highway Patrol. In 2002, 24 died and 200 were injured.

Missouri hires private contractors to install and maintain the cable barriers. They cost about \$110,000 per mile to install and \$12,000 per mile annually to maintain and repair, Briggs said.

Construction costs are covered by federal funds the state must use on safety-related issues because Missouri has not outlawed open liquor containers in vehicles. If it had such a law, the money could be used on general highway expenses, Briggs said.

"We were trying to make the best possible use of this money by putting it into the cable project," Briggs said.

A St. Louis area group called Citizens for Safe Medians has raised more than \$50,000 to help the state pay for the barriers. The founder of the group, Lou Holtmann, lost his wife, daughter, sister-in-law and nephew in a 1996 crossover accident on I-44.

"If a cable barrier had been there, we would not have lost four members of the family," Holtmann said Wednesday.

Upkeep required

An official from one highway safety group said he was not sold on the cable barriers. Gerald Donaldson, senior researcher for Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety, in Washington, said the barriers lose their effectiveness when cable tension is not monitored and maintained.

“Even if you do that, you don’t necessarily get a barrier system that will accommodate all vehicles that are going to strike it,” Donaldson said.

The relatively low barrier may cause vehicles with high centers of gravity, such as SUVs and pickups, to flip over when they strike it, Donaldson said. Without a barrier, those vehicles may have avoided any type of accident or damage by stopping in the median, he said.

Evans said he had not heard of any vehicles in Missouri flipping over after striking the cable barriers. He said any vehicle going fast enough to do that probably would have continued through the median and into oncoming traffic if the barrier had not been there.

Mike Right, spokesman for AAA Auto Club of Missouri in St. Louis, said the barriers prevent serious accidents, even if they may cause relatively minor ones.

“I’ll trade a bunch of dented fenders and scratched doors and skinned roofs anytime to prevent a head-on crash at 70 miles per hour,” Right said.

As for concern that vehicles may pass through the cables, Evans said that had happened only twice on I-435. In one case, a pickup sailed over the cable barrier, and in another case a Pontiac Grand Am hit the barrier head-on. The barriers are designed to best stop vehicles approaching at angles of from 22 to 25 degrees, he said.

Cable barriers have been controversial in other states.

Seven vehicles crashed through cable barriers on Interstate 5 in the state of Washington in the past two years, with one crash killing three persons, *The Seattle Times* reported in June. One man filed a \$15 million claim against the state’s Department of Transportation, which contends that barriers have stopped 91 percent of vehicles that have struck them.

In West Virginia, transportation officials are reconsidering their decision to install cable rather than the more expensive concrete barriers on Interstate 81, because cable barriers did not prevent several recent collisions, *The Associated Press* reported this month.

While meant to prevent crossover accidents, the barriers also reduce the mobility of emergency vehicles, such as patrol cars, because of fewer median breaks to make U-turns. There are crossover roadways on the interstates, but they can be several miles apart.

“Obviously, we can’t cross over the medians with those barriers,” said Lt. Tim Hull, spokesman for the Missouri Highway Patrol. “It will force us to use a different type of enforcement for speeders.”

For example, officers could radio nearby patrol cars going in the direction of the speeder, he said. The patrol also makes regular use of air patrols.

Hull said the patrol supports the barriers, “and anything that makes the highways safer.”

First glance