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## **Cables stretch to guard motorists**

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Saved by the wire

A tractor-trailer cruising east on Interstate 70 in Warren County swerved into the grassy median last July and knocked out cable barriers stretching the length of more than three football fields. The truck stopped short of oncoming traffic.

Three days later, another tractor-trailer eastbound on I-70, this time in Montgomery County, struck the barriers and wiped out 687 feet of the cable before coasting to a halt and overturning in the grass.

Neither driver was injured, and state and county officials say the crashes illustrate the success of the safety devices, which are going up in the medians of three Missouri interstates. They are being installed to stop crossovers - a crash in which a vehicle crosses the grass separating the eastbound and westbound lanes and hits an oncoming vehicle.

The devices have provided peace of mind for motorists such as Edward Dolbashian, director of orchestras at the University of Missouri at Columbia, who commutes 100 miles each way from his home in St. Peters to his office at the university.

"Driving that distance so often, you're just very aware of the traffic on the other side of the highway because you hear about these crossover accidents," he said. "So with the barriers there you feel a little more comfortable knowing they might help you out in a bad situation."

The devices became a reality thanks to a campaign led by Warren County Coroner Roger Mauzy, who saw 34 people die in crossover accidents in his county over a 10-year period. Since the cables have gone up, no more fatalities have occurred on I-70 in Warren County, and only one motorist who struck the devices suffered any injury.

"I've gone out on several accidents that have gone into the cables, and people are out there kicking their cars and cussing at their cars because they're ruined," Mauzy said. "But at least they're alive to cuss and swear at their cars. And that's the whole idea - to keep people alive."

The barriers are made of three strands of cable strung through poles and cost about \$100,000 a mile to install and about \$20,000 a year per mile to maintain, according to highway department officials. A contractor who works with the highway department has 10 days to repair damaged cable after being notified about it.

John Miller, an engineer for the Missouri Department of Transportation, says the barriers work well but are not foolproof. In Callaway County, one motorist drove through the cables in July and was killed by oncoming traffic, the only fatality officials can recall. But that motorist approached the barriers at nearly a 90-degree angle, Miller said, noting that the devices stop cars about 90 percent of the time.

### **437 more miles**

Meanwhile, work is steadily progressing on the highway department's plan announced six months ago to install 437 more miles of the cable barriers along interstates 70, 44 and 29, he said.

On I-70, the barriers are up from St. Louis past Columbia. Work to connect the barriers all the way to Kansas City will be completed either later this year or next spring, depending on the weather.

Design work is being completed on 244 miles of I-44 stretching from St. Louis to Joplin. Work should begin early next year and be completed by December 2007, he said.

Barrier installation on 28 miles of I-29 between St. Joseph, Mo., and Kansas City should also begin next year.

Miller said MoDOT chose Interstates 44 and 70 for the safety devices because they have narrow medians - less than 60 feet - a high volume of traffic and a higher occurrence of crossovers.

"Interstates 44 and 70 were both designed many years ago when travel wasn't that great, and it wasn't an issue," Miller said. "But we carry 30,000 vehicles even in the rural areas on these roads now, and the chance of crossing over and getting to the other side without hitting someone is becoming much less. That's why these cables seem to be a good idea."

When work is completed, Miller said, the state will be studying where to go next with the barriers.

### **Illinois medians**

Most interstates in rural stretches of Illinois still lack median barriers, said Matt Vanover, a spokesman for the state's Department of Transportation. Illinois is developing a policy that would help engineers determine where median barriers are needed most.

In September, however, Illinois bid out three projects to build high-tension cable guardrails in three areas: along Interstate 57 near the Dix interchange north of Mount Vernon; on Interstate 55 between Interstate 70 and Route 143 in Madison County; and along Interstate 55 in Grundy County.

Vanover did not know how many miles of interstate highway would get barriers, but he said the engineers had picked those interstates based on years of crossover crash data and by comparing practices in several other states. The state is planning two additional projects to build median barriers next year, Vanover said.

In Missouri, the projects are being funded in part with federal money that states get for educational programs connected with laws banning open containers of alcoholic beverages in cars. All states get such money, but because Missouri has no open-beverage law, the money it gets has to be spent on other safety projects such as cable barriers. The funds cannot be used to build and repair highways.

### **Investment questioned**

One I-70 commuter, Bill Allen, works as an assistant professor at the University of Missouri at Columbia and drives home to Chesterfield on weekends. Allen, a former reporter for the Post-Dispatch, questioned the cost effectiveness of the cable barriers.

"I'm not saying it isn't an excellent idea to have cable barriers that prevent deaths or serious injuries or even accidents, but I believe if you look more broadly at traffic safety and deaths on the road, a dollar spent on driver education would go a lot further toward reducing death and injury than putting up physical barriers," he said.

Other commuters disagree with Allen's assessment. Among them is Andrew Shea, a public relations specialist with the Solae Co. in St. Louis. Shea, who commutes to the metropolitan area several times a week from Columbia, says he gets an eerie feeling every time he drives by the cables downed by crashes.

"That road is tremendously dangerous anyway, and it's not going to get any better by itself," he said. "So adding those wires is probably one of the only things you can do at such an affordable price that actually adds some decent safety to the road."

**Joel Currier of the Post-Dispatch contributed information to this report.**

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