

NEW FREEWAY BARRIER SAVING LIVES

Highway cables pay off immediately

In just two days, steel barrier prevented two drivers from crashing across median

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Witnesses thought the southbound Honda CRV had blown a tire as it traveled across two lanes of I-270 traffic toward the median. They didn't see any brake lights.

Inside the Honda, Scott Schuler was oblivious. He had blacked out, unable to control the projectile speeding toward oncoming traffic.

"Without braking, at 65 mph, he was heading right into a wall of headlights. But he hit the system instead," Hilliard Police Lt. Bob Parkey said.

Parkey said Schuler and anyone else who might have perished in this could-have-been head-on crash during rush hour Friday owed their lives to a newly installed cable-barrier system.

"It was the poster example for these barriers. It is exactly what saved his life," Parkey said.

For years, Parkey had lobbied the Ohio Department of Transportation to do something about what he perceived to be the staggering, and preventable, loss of life from crossover crashes.

At least 13 deaths in eight years might have been prevented in Hilliard alone had the cable barriers been in place, he told state officials.

ODOT listened. The installation of several miles of cable barrier was completed just weeks before Friday's crash. Schuler, 36, of Clintonville, had just dropped off his two young children at a child-care center and was headed to his engineering job at Roxane Labs in Hilliard.

Why a healthy man with no serious medical history would faint remains a mystery, said his wife, Margaret, 34. Losing consciousness at highway speeds and surviving is "nothing short of a miracle," she said. "He literally blacked out. It was just a freak situation.

"He would have died or killed someone. It is so chilling," she said, tears welling. "But he walked away without a bruise or a scratch."

Mr. Schuler was out of town yesterday and could not be reached, his wife said.

John Lindeman was driving behind Schuler.

"He slammed into the cable, and the cable seemed to absorb some of the shock," Lindeman, 23, recalled.

"Had that wire system not been there, I can't imagine how many cars would have been involved. There were semis and cars coming."

Two days after Schuler's crash, and 3 miles away, Michael Jones was saved from a similar tragedy.

He was northbound on I-270 with a friend Sunday afternoon when someone cut him off near the Tuttle mall exit. "I hit it (the cable wall), and my air bag popped. And the impact flipped (the car) on its side, and it skidded about 20 feet and popped back up on all fours," Jones, 24, recalled.

Jones and a passenger were not injured. His 1996 Volkswagen Jetta was totaled.

"There was definitely more spring action," he said of the impact with the cables. "I think I could tell that we were going to be all right."

Cable barriers also have been deemed a success since their installation on I-75 north of Cincinnati.

"There were crossover crashes before and there have been zero since," said Lisa Zigmund, an ODOT maintenance and traffic engineer.

In addition to those on I-270, the cable barriers have been installed along Rt. 315 in Worthington. ODOT is reviewing crash data to see where else the barriers are needed in central Ohio, Zigmund said. The cost so far has been \$630,000, about five times less than concrete barriers, she said.

The price is easily worth it, Parkey said.

"We would have probably had two or three fatalities out of this," he said of Friday's crash. "So it's already paid for itself."

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