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Cables seen as barrier to road deaths

Nikki Boertman/The Commercial Appeal

TDOT is testing a cable-barrier system along the I-40 north loop in Memphis. This is a new, cost-effective system designed to keep cars from crossing the median to other lanes. It is also cheaper than guardrails and prevents cars from bouncing back into traffic.

By Tom Charlier
Contact
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Easy to install yet strong enough to halt a hurtling SUV, a cable-barrier system recently strung along Interstate 40 in North Memphis shows promise as a flexible, cost-effective way to prevent deadly median-crossover wrecks, transportation officials say.

The Tennessee Department of Transportation is testing the effectiveness of cable barriers along a 3.6-mile stretch of the I-40/240 north loop. Variations on the concept are undergoing demonstrations in Chattanooga, Knoxville and Nashville, TDOT spokesman Pamela Marshall said.

The goal of the testing is to find the best way to halt vehicles before they veer across medians and into oncoming traffic in the opposite lanes.

The barrier system, completed only within the past several weeks, already has proved successful in halting a sport utility vehicle, Marshall said.

"It did stop it...," she said. "The vehicle gets tangled in it, and it keeps the vehicle from bouncing back into traffic."

Although there is little in the way of comprehensive statistics, median-crossover accidents have emerged as a major problem on the nation's highways in recent years. The grass strips separating lanes often don't provide sufficient protection.

"If someone leaves the roadway fast enough, then they're not always going to regain control of the vehicle until they've crossed all that distance and entered the opposing lanes of traffic," said Jennifer Gavin, spokesman for the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO).

In North Carolina, crossover wrecks killed 105 people between 1988 and 1991, a study showed. The crashes were "steadily increasing" in number and three times as likely to result in death than other wrecks, the state found.

A study in Florida concluded that 80 percent of all crossover wrecks occur within a mile of interchanges, suggesting that drivers lost control while jockeying for position to enter or exit the interstate.

Following a May 2003 crossover crash in Linden, N.J., that killed six people, the National Transportation Safety Board recommended the Federal Highway Administration work with AASHTO to establish criteria determining where median barriers are needed.

The barrier systems consist of cables strung between poles less than 3 feet tall. They are designed to snag vehicles by their front wheel wells.

Since they're relatively flexible, the cables cause less damage to the cars than do concrete barriers or guardrails. They also are cheap, costing only about 60 percent of the price of installing guardrails and barely a third of what concrete barriers cost. A Washington state study also found that the average cost of repairing barriers after they had been struck was only $733.

Gavin said studies across the nation show that cable barriers have have been generally effective, except for areas where the slope of a median allowed vehicles to "nose under" them. That problem is easy to correct, she said.

Marshall said the Tennessee highway sections where the barriers are being tested all have been prone to crossover wrecks.