

Safer highways the goal of effort

Improvements through program to include new barriers, turn lanes

09:27 PM CST on Wednesday, December 15, 2004

By **TONY HARTZEL / The Dallas Morning News**

AUSTIN – Hundreds of miles of state highways – including 188 miles around Dallas – will get extensive improvements as part of the largest road safety program in state history, Gov. Rick Perry and state officials announced Wednesday.

The \$600 million safety initiative, launched by the Legislature last year, also will add a wire median barrier at the Sherman site of Texas' deadliest crash in a decade. When complete, the improvements at 644 locations statewide are expected to save as many as 90 lives and prevent 1,100 injuries a year, according to the Texas Transportation Institute.

Mr. Perry thanked voters for approving the safety bond package in 2003. At the news conference, he was flanked by Julie and Guy Blasingame, whose daughter Rachel died in May 2003 when a car crossed the Interstate 635 median in Mesquite and struck her vehicle.

"Our great hope is that the work we are beginning will prevent other families from having to deal with the grief you've experienced," he told the Mesquite couple.

The Texas Department of Transportation is scheduled to approve the projects today. Thirty Dallas-area locations will get improvements valued at \$38.1 million. The projects will take one of three forms: \$23 million for new wire median barriers, \$690,000 for new turn lanes and \$14.4 million for widening shoulders or traffic lanes on two-lane highways.

Concerns about crossover accidents led Transportation Department officials to install wire barriers in the medians of several locations, including the site where Ms. Blasingame was killed.

Elsewhere in Texas, the Transportation Department will build overpasses and improve bridge guardrails and add traffic lights or streetlights to increase safety. In Sherman, the state will spend \$2.6 million to add a wire median barrier at U.S. Highway 75 north of U.S. Highway 82.

Ten people died at the location in September when a tractor-trailer rig crossed over the median and collided with several vehicles.

State officials said that accident led directly to the planned installation of median barriers in that area.

Funding came from legislative approval to issue \$3 billion in bonds for road projects. The bonds came with the stipulation that at least 20 percent of the money be spent on safety improvements.

Most projects should begin in 2005, but some could start in 2006. Without the bond funds, many of the projects might not be built for at least eight to 10 years.

The bonds will be paid back over time with gas tax revenue. Because of that, the state must weigh any future demand to issue more bonds for safety projects carefully with the need to keep money flowing to other road projects, said Ric Williamson, chairman of the Texas Transportation Commission.

"It had been the official policy for years that if people would drive safely, they would not need