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State to invest initial gas-tax money in cable barriers

Regardless of whether the 9.5-cent tax hike is repealed, the safety devices will be doubled.

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Herald Writers*

The new state gas tax may be repealed this fall, but before it goes away, it will pay for the state to double its use of controversial cable barriers used on busy roads to keep cars from colliding head on.

The state expects to collect \$35 million from the 9.5-cent gas tax hike the Legislature approved earlier this year by the time Election Day arrives in November.

That's when Initiative 912 will ask voters whether they want to snuff out the gas tax hike. Even if the initiative passes, the state will get to keep the money it collects between now and then.

The state will use \$3 million to \$5 million of that money to install 54 miles of cable barrier in the middle of freeways and highways across the state, including a small area in Snohomish County.

About 60 miles of cable barrier have been installed in Washington since 2000, including 10 miles along I-5 in Marysville, where there has been a rash of fatal crossover accidents in recent months.

The state is scrutinizing the effectiveness of the cables along three miles of that stretch.

An analysis of five years of accidents by The Herald found that the cables there failed to stop crossover crashes 20 percent of the time. The accidents killed four people between 2000 and 2004.

State officials said their Marysville investigation should not slow plans to install more cable barriers.

Data shows that with the exception of the three-mile stretch in Marysville, the cables have worked well, said Dave McCormick, the department's assistant regional administrator for maintenance and traffic operations.

State accident data shows that along most of the 10-mile stretch near Marysville, cable barriers kept vehicles from crossing the median 91 percent of the time.

"We want to look very carefully at the Marysville section and learn from it," McCormick said.

A report on the Marysville investigation is due out at the end of September, and the lessons learned will be applied to the new cables being installed this fall and next spring, he said.

The state last week hired a contractor to place 16 miles of barrier on I-90 in the Wenatchee area for \$867,000. It is currently looking to spend \$3 million to \$4 million to install 38 miles of barrier on small stretches of highway across the Puget Sound region, including on a small section of I-5 at the Snohomish-Skagit county boundary.

The state has three more cable barrier projects that it could spend gas tax dollars on, but it won't because of complications with federal rules.

"This is going to be all that we are going to do," said Linda Mullen, a DOT spokeswoman. "It will save lives, and we'll see what happens next."

If voters pass Initiative 912, the gas tax would end when election results are certified Dec. 8.

Estimates are that \$42 million will be collected by then from the 3-cent increase that took effect July 1. Of the total, \$35 million is for the state and \$7 million is for distribution to cities and counties.

A decision on what to do with the rest of the state money won't be made until later, Mullen said. The state wants to spend the money on projects that can be completed with the available cash.

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