

This is a printer friendly version of an article from the **The Olympian**
To print this article open the file menu and choose Print.

[Back](#)

Crash-ridden stretch of I-5 gets some safety attention

\$426,000 project expected to last six weeks

BY SCOTT GUTIERREZ

THE OLYMPIAN

A deadly stretch of Interstate 5 between Maytown and Grand Mound is about to become a little safer.

□ Work began Monday on a \$426,000 project to install cable barriers in the median of I-5 in the stretch that has become known for deadly collisions caused by vehicles veering into the grassy, unprotected median.

The state Department of Transportation will install high-tension steel cable from the U.S. Highway 12 interchange to the Maytown exit. The cables run in three lines through steel posts anchored in concrete.

The cables will provide a temporary solution until construction begins in 2008 to widen I-5 from four to six lanes along the same stretch. That project includes making room in the median for concrete barriers, which wouldn't fit in the current configuration, said John McNutt, project manager for this year's construction.

"It's really not practical at this time. If we put them on the shoulder they would be a little too close to traffic. The cable barrier is an interim solution," he said.

Protection from oncoming drivers is long overdue in that section of freeway, where between 1999 and 2004, 22 crossover collisions were reported. Of six traffic deaths reported along that span, three were caused by drivers entering the median, according to the transportation department.

Those types of collisions often are at high speeds and give drivers little chance to get out of the way.

One of the worst was in November 2003, when a driver lost control in the northbound lanes, shot across the median and collided head-on with a southbound vehicle. A tractor-trailer then rolled over the top of the northbound vehicle and killed the driver.

"We have a lot of areas with similar problems," State Patrol Trooper J.J. Gundermann said.

Statistics compiled by the state show that once cable barriers are in place, serious collisions involving deaths and injuries decrease, while the overall number of accidents goes up. The increase is likely due to drivers who would have driven unscathed into the median and recovered had the barrier not been in place, officials said.

But the cables have generated some controversy. Last summer, three people died when a pickup hauling a trailer plowed through cables along the freeway median near and into oncoming traffic near Marysville. It prompted some to question whether cable barriers are adequate and whether the state should place solid concrete bulkheads.

McNutt said the cables selected for Thurston County's project are higher-tension and less likely to go down when struck. He said the cables used on this project are designed to withstand an impact from "typical" vehicles.

He said several factors played into the Marysville-area fatal crash last summer, including the angle at which the vehicle struck the barrier.

"The bottom line is, it still will reduce the number of accidents. That's what we're trying to do," he said.

While concrete barriers are immovable, the cables have more flexibility that prevents vehicles from ricocheting back into their own lanes of travel, which also can be a benefit, officials say.

The state is putting up 54 miles of cable in seven counties at areas selected because of accident trends, traffic speeds, availability of shoulder space and other factors, according to DOT's Web site.

In Thurston County's project, only two spots that state troopers use as turnarounds will be left open. As part of the project, crews also will remove earth berms along concrete barriers at the Scatter Creek and Maytown bridges. The berms pose a risk to drivers because in some cases, vehicles have gone airborne after striking them, he said.

Construction will last about six weeks with the work done overnight. Drivers passing through should expect at least one lane to be closed during construction, he said.

Scott Gutierrez covers courts, crime and law enforcement for The Olympian. He can be reached at 360-754-5465 or by e-mail at sgutierrez@theolympian.com.
