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Lives saved as highways get cable

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By **Wes Johnson, USA TODAY**

SPRINGFIELD, Mo. — A relatively low-cost safety device — steel cable strung in highway medians — is proving phenomenally effective at saving lives, perhaps more so than steel-beam or concrete barriers.

Steel-beam, concrete and cable barriers all cut down on accidents in which cars cross over into oncoming traffic. Cable, however, also cuts down on the number of rebound accidents, in which a vehicle hits a barrier and bounces back into traffic.

North Carolina, Missouri, Texas, Washington, California and Utah are among the nation's leaders in installing median guard cable, according to the Texas Transportation Institute, a research body at Texas A&M University. The institute says 27 other states are following suit, including Florida, Wisconsin, Maine and Idaho.

Because cable barriers are considerably cheaper, states can install them in medians where motorists had no protection before. Cable costs about 30% less than steel and 50% less than concrete, says Dave Olson, research manager at the Washington State Department of Transportation.

The low cost and high success rate impressed Utah highway officials. "Two years ago, we heard about guard cables at a traffic-safety conference," says Nile Easton, spokesman for the Utah Department of Transportation. "In a 9-mile test area, we've gone from having 12 crossover fatalities (in a two-year period) to none since we put guard cables in."

Kristina Bernskoetter of Columbia, Mo., says newly installed median guard cables may have saved her life.

Shortly before Christmas last year, she hit a patch of ice on Interstate 70. Her Jeep slid out of control into the median and toward oncoming traffic.

"I remember thinking, 'I'm going to cross into the other lanes,'" Bernskoetter says. "I didn't even notice the guard cables. I did a quick prayer kind of thing before I hit."

Her Jeep skidded into the steel cable, which snagged the vehicle, cushioned the blow and stopped her from sliding into the oncoming lanes. She also didn't bounce back into speeding traffic on her side of the highway. She says she drove away uninjured.

Brian Chandler, a traffic-safety engineer with the Missouri Department of Transportation, says the department recently completed installing 179 miles of median guard cable on I-70 at a cost of \$20.5 million.

By the time cable projects are completed on I-44 and I-55, the department will have spent about \$50 million — all of it from federal highway safety funds that require no matching money from the state.

Most important, Chandler says, median guard cables work. "When a vehicle hits a concrete barrier, it usually bounces back into traffic," he says. "But when you hit the guard cable, it gives 10 to 12 feet and helps absorb the force. The posts that hold the cable up are designed to break away. The cable stretches and wraps up the car in it."

Highway traffic engineers also say that because the cables give when hit, the G-forces on a driver involved in a guard-cable collision are much less than with a fixed barrier, Olson said.

According to the Missouri DOT, I-70 had 24 median crossover fatalities in 2002. In 2005, after guard cables had been installed, there were only six — four of which happened in spots with no guard cables.

North Carolina was the first to embrace guard cables on all of its interstate highways.

Brian Murphy, traffic-safety engineer with the North Carolina Department of Transportation, says his state has installed about 600 miles of cables.

"We started our big push statewide in 1998, and we have seen our crossover fatality rates go down 75%," he says.

Jim McDonnell, associate program director of engineering for the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials, says, "These things do save lives, and more states are putting them in place, where appropriate."

Dustin Terpening, spokesman for the Washington State Department of Transportation, says his state began installing guard cables in 2000 and will soon have 140 miles installed on interstate highways.

"Cable barrier successfully restrained 95% of the vehicles that hit it," he says.

"With cable barrier, you're far less likely to have a fatality or serious injury," he says. "We just can't get it in fast enough."


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