



A little paint may save money, lives

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By **Larry Copeland, USA TODAY**

Cash-strapped transportation officials across the nation are turning to low-cost, low-tech methods to combat potentially deadly behaviors such as speeding and tailgating.

The innovations include:

- "Optical speed bars" painted on the road to trick drivers into thinking they're going faster than they actually are. Virginia, Illinois, New York and Texas are trying them.

- White dots painted on the highway to discourage drivers from tailgating. Washington, Maryland, Minnesota and Pennsylvania are using this method.

"Everybody is dealing with budget crunches right now," says Harold Linnenkohl, president of the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials and commissioner of Georgia's Department of Transportation. "You always have to ask the questions: Is it economical to do it, and does it work?"

Last year, 43,443 people were killed on the nation's roads, up 1.4% from 42,836 in 2004, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration reported last month.

"Traffic fatalities are proving very difficult to reduce," says Frank Moretti, director of policy and research at TRIP, an organization based in Washington, D.C., that promotes policies to relieve traffic congestion and enhance highway safety. "So transportation agencies are doing everything they can think of to make the roadway environment safer."

This summer, the Virginia Department of Transportation began testing optical speed bars on a stretch of road in Fairfax County outside Washington and on U.S. 460 near Norfolk. The speed bars are white, parallel lines with a gradually decreasing distance between them. That gives motorists the illusion they're going faster than they are, says Gene Arnold, senior research scientist at the Virginia Transportation Research Council.

He says Virginia decided to try the optical markings after a state legislator saw the practice used overseas. The speed bars will be tested for 90 days and added elsewhere if they work

Linnenkohl says a number of traffic safety innovations are being imported from abroad. "We have these scanning tours, where we send engineers to other countries to look at other things to see how it works," he says. "We ask: Does it have an application in the United States?"

They don't always work out so well.

Washington state implemented the "2 Dots 2 Safety" program on Aug. 11. The program involved painting oval dots 80 feet apart on a 2-mile stretch of Interstate 5 and posting signs urging drivers to keep two dots between them and the vehicle ahead of them. The state discontinued the program after three days when it caused 7-mile traffic jams during rush hour, says Lisa Murdock, spokeswoman for the Washington Department of Transportation.

The program, which cost about \$30,000, was designed for vehicles traveling 60 mph, Murdock says, but it worsened traffic jams

when drivers were moving more slowly during peak hours. "We still think it's a good program," she says. "We know it has worked in other states and other countries. We're meeting with the Washington State Patrol next week to find an area that would be better suited for it."

States aren't just trying to discourage dangerous driving. They're also attempting to reduce injuries when accidents do occur by using highway barriers made of flexible cables. When used in a median, the barriers prevent cars from crossing over and colliding with vehicles coming the other direction.

"Cable usually is more cost-effective" than steel beam or concrete, says Brian Murphy, traffic safety project engineer with the North Carolina Department of Transportation. It also absorbs more impact. "Concrete won't give in a crash," he says. "So your car and your body are going to absorb all that impact."

Wisconsin is one of many states installing cable barriers, says David Vieth, director of the Bureau of Highway Operations in the state Department of Transportation. Cable medians are being added on 60-70 miles of roadway to reduce crossover collisions, he says.

Then there is the ultimate in cost-effective highway safety innovations: cutting down trees. That's what Georgia is doing along some busy roads, Linnenkohl says. "Of all the fatalities from vehicles that leave the road, about 75% of them are hitting trees," he says.

"We started removing trees out of what we call the 'recovery zone' alongside the highway. That's the distance it would take for somebody to regain control of their vehicle once they left the pavement. It could be 35 feet, 50 feet or 75 feet."


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