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LIFE SAVERS »

A huge success on I-70, guard cables coming to I-44

\$50 million in federal grants help state string cable, which catches cars and reduces crossover accidents.

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News-Leader

Shortly before Christmas last year, Columbia resident Kristina Nickelson survived every motorist's nightmare.

A patch of black ice on an interstate highway sent her Jeep suddenly out of control, slipping, sliding into the median toward oncoming high-speed traffic.

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

Her vehicle skidded into three strands of steel cable that state highway crews had recently installed. The cables snagged her Jeep, cushioning the blow and stopping her from sliding into oncoming I-70 traffic.

She drove away uninjured — rather than possibly dying in a head-on collision, and others possibly dying, too.

It's an increasingly common story in Missouri. State highway officials say the three-wire "median guard cables" have stopped crossover accidents 94 percent of the time on I-70 and drastically reduced crossover fatalities.

And by the end of the 2008, more than 200 miles of cables will be in place along much of I-44, from St. Louis to Joplin.

The sooner, the better, according to Lou Holtmann, whose wife, son, sister-in-law and nephew were killed in a 1996 crossover accident on I-44 near Stanton.

Holtmann said a U-Haul truck towing a car blew out a front tire, sending the truck across the median and directly into his wife's van.

The St. Louis native is convinced median guard cables would have prevented the tragedy.

"Oh, no question about it," Holtmann said. "If the cables wouldn't have stopped the truck altogether, they would have at least slowed it down enough for my wife to get out of the way."

That accident spurred Holtmann to do what he could to make Missouri roads safer. He formed "Citizens for Safe Medians" and lobbied lawmakers and highway officials to install guard cables.

His group also raised \$60,000 to help pay for median guard cables on I-55.

Despite his loss, Holtmann said the Missouri Department of Transportation should be commended for taking action.

"Everybody from day one was sympathetic to the loss of my family," he said. "It could just as easily happen to you as me. But sympathy is one thing. Action is another."

Brian Chandler, MoDOT traffic safety engineer, said Holtmann's effort was significant.

"He's definitely been involved in pushing the issue with MoDOT," Chandler said.

LIFESAVING STRETCHES

MoDOT just completed installing 179 miles of median guard cable on I-70 at a cost of \$20.5 million.
