

# Oregon traffic officials say U.S. 26 cable barrier appears to be working

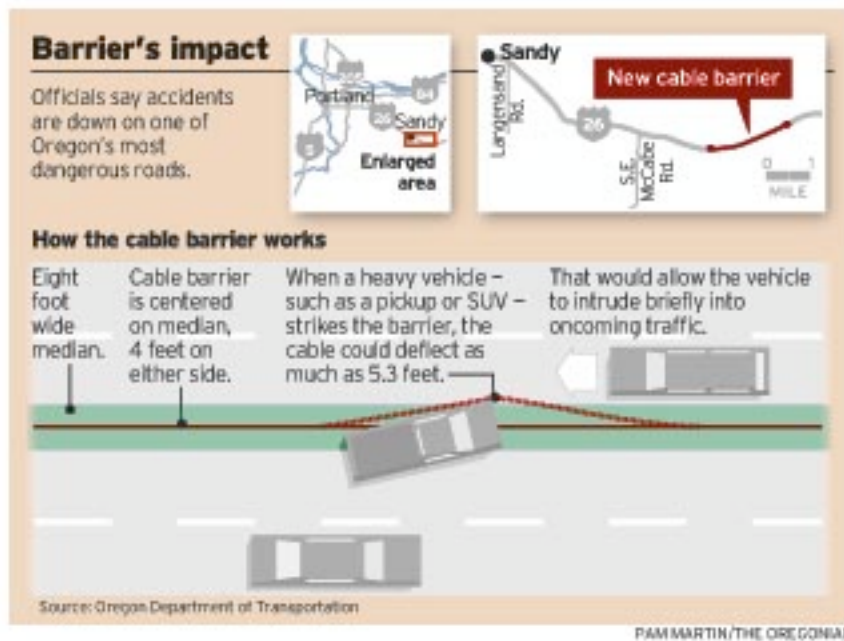
By Michael Russell, The Oregonian

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More than two years after a cable barrier was installed in the median along a perilous stretch of one of Oregon's most dangerous roads -- U.S. 26 between Sandy and Government Camp -- officials are ready to rate its effectiveness.

And the grade is good.

Crews from the Hoodland Fire District have responded to dozens of fatal wrecks over the decades on the road that winds up Mount Hood. Fire Chief Mic Eby is impressed with the median.



"It's so successful that, in my opinion, they should put the barrier up from here to Coeur d'Alene," he said.

Early crash statistics appear to back up his review.

In six years of data before the barrier's installation, 69 percent of crashes along that stretch of road left at least one person injured, Oregon Department of Transportation spokesman Dave Thompson said.

In 10 crashes recorded after the barriers went up in late summer 2007 -- an admittedly small sample size, Thompson cautioned -- none resulted in injuries.

It's only two years and 10 crashes, Thompson said, "so we have to be careful that this is statistically significant, but in those 10 crashes, those people were safe from injury."

According to Oregon State Police, at least 69 people died on the 32-mile stretch of road between 1990 and 2007, including at least 13 people in 2003, giving the stretch its moniker, "Blood Alley." Almost all the fatalities occurred in head-on crashes involving two or more vehicles. It was designated a Safety Corridor in 1996. In 2006, that corridor was extended east of Government Camp almost to the Confederated Warm Springs Reservation border at milepost 66.

Minor improvements to the road followed the safety designation, but the biggest change came with the installation of the barrier, which runs for about 1 3/4 miles between mileposts 30 to 33, with a nearly 1/4-mile gap near the halfway point.

Thompson said ODOT has been cautious in promoting the \$1.3 million barrier, which won't have its formal evaluation in 2012.

"But in general it's been very, very successful," he said.

Oregon State Police spokesman Lt. Gregg Hastings concurs.

"We've seen it as very helpful in preventing crossover crashes that we've had in that stretch," he said.

And problems feared by some local emergency agencies have proved to be unfounded.

Eby, for example, predicted that a crash would cause severe lane closures along the road, saying that the barrier had narrowed the roadway so much that both crews and traffic would not be able to pass.

"That has not proven to be a problem at all," Eby said Wednesday. "What has happened is it's basically had Sandy and Hoodland Fire communicate: 'You go eastbound, we'll go westbound,'" Eby said. "It's created more teamwork."

Eby thinks the long lines of cable have already saved lives.

"I've actually witnessed them catch a car that, chances were, it would have gone through and hit a chip truck," he said.

According to Eby, the driver was mad that his paint job had been scratched: In year's past, he might have been dead.

-- **Michael Russell**

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