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SARASOTA COUNTY

What's causing all those I-75 crashes?

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SARASOTA COUNTY — Working as a home health care nurse, Sonji Lewis regularly travels Interstate 75 across Sarasota County and beyond.

And like many commuters, she has come fear the construction zone between River Road and Toledo Blade Boulevard in North Port, marked by orange barrels on either side, dump trucks moving in and out of traffic and narrow, uneven lanes.



One person was hospitalized after this dump truck overturned on Interstate 75 near North Port on May 24. (Photo provided the North Port Police Department)

“It's scary out there,” Lewis said. “There's no room for error. It's not like I can move over to the right or the left because there are barrels there.”

In the wake of another recent accident that left two people with traumatic injuries, the Florida Department of Transportation says it is doing all it can to address safety concerns during reconstruction on the 25-mile stretch of interstate.

But those precautions, which include signage and partially reduced speed limits, have not stopped a surge in accidents.

A Herald-Tribune analysis found that accidents on I-75 between River Road and Toledo Blade in South Sarasota County increased 81.5 percent from January through May compared with a similar period in 2012, before construction in the area started a year later.

The number of accidents causing injuries has spiked 87.5 percent.

As of the end of May, the Florida Highway Patrol investigated 292 crashes this year on Interstate 75 in Sarasota County. Of those, 98 occurred in the stretch from River Road to Toledo Blade.

At least 45 of those accidents involved injuries and four involved fatalities.

The potential dangers of the road were illustrated again when a six-vehicle wreck near the Sumter Boulevard exit on Memorial Day was followed by a nearby wreck the next day. In that accident, a car that struck a pole and resulted in two trauma patients being hospitalized.

But Lewis said it's not the construction that's the problem.

“I think it's the drivers,” she said. “They throw caution to the wind to get where they're going.”

Brian Doerner, 41, a North Port resident who's commuted from Sumter Boulevard past River Road on I-75 for the last 16 years, agreed.

"I don't really have any complaints except for the other drivers," he said. "People are texting, checking emails on their phones while driving through a construction zone. It's not rocket science folks."

FHP officers also say the overwhelming onus is on those behind the wheel.

"What we're seeing, unfortunately, these are happening just out of or coming into construction zones," FHP Trooper Kenneth Watson said. "...People aren't paying attention. It's simply that."

Roughly nine miles of I-75 is being widened between River Road and Sumter Boulevard, work that began in October 2013 and may be completed by late summer. On Jan. 4, work began on widening the more than 16-mile stretch between Sumter Boulevard and Harborview Road in Port Charlotte. That project may be completed by the end of 2017.

"We're constantly trying to get people to understand the most important thing to do when operating a motor vehicle is to pay attention," Watson said. "You make a mistake operating a 3,500-pound vehicle and you can end up killing someone and hurting yourself as well."

Florida Department of Transportation spokesman Robin Stublen said the agency makes certain road construction sites "meet or exceed federal requirements" and are properly marked with signs, cones and barrels. Drivers need to be aware of possible lane shifts.

But in the I-75 construction zones in southern Sarasota County, the speed limit rarely changes from the standard 70 mph.

"It's our policy that when possible to maintain 70 mph through our construction zones," Stublen said.

Many drivers already drive more than 10 mph over the normal speed limit, he said. When the speed limit is lowered even further, those drivers have a tendency to become frustrated with people moving slower around them and take risks on the road.

One area that has seen a lowered speed limit is farther north, where construction is ongoing near the University Parkway exit. There, southbound drivers see the speed limit dip to 60 mph when they cross a temporary bridge.

"It's out of the normal, so that's where we lower the speed limit to 60 mph," Stublen said. "People going north still have the 70-mph speed limit because (the route) hasn't been changed."

Stublen added that too often, drivers are "texting, eating, drinking, talking to their kids or looking at the construction" rather than watching the road.

Also, because of the construction, "trucks may have access points that don't usually exist on the interstate," Watson said.

"I don't know what else we can do," Stublen said of the FDOT. "This is a behavior issue...The reason we have the crashes is not the construction, it's the people who are driving. They really need to concentrate."

Lowering the speed limit even more would not only "defeat" the purpose of the interstate, it could cause drivers to become frustrated and risk passing others they think are going too slow, Stublen said. "That leads to more crashes."

On April 11, a 28-year-old woman, her 22-year-old female passenger and an infant

were hospitalized with non-life threatening injuries at about 2:20 a.m. when their sedan went off the highway near Toledo Blade and into the woods.

A day earlier, at about 1:45 p.m., a 20-year-old Sarasota woman received critical injuries and her passenger, a 22-year-old North Port man, died in the construction area about four miles north of Sumter Boulevard. The woman's northbound car swerved and she overcorrected. The car rotated, struck a barrel and then a parked road paver.

On March 14, shortly before 4:30 p.m., a 12-year-old girl from Hialeah died when tire tread separated on an SUV in which she was a passenger. The driver lost control near River Road, over-corrected and the SUV rotated, struck a berm and overturned. The driver and two other passengers were injured.

On March 31, at about 9:30 p.m., a 54-year-old road worker from Port Charlotte died when he was hit by a dump truck while working near the Toledo Blade exit.

On Feb. 21, a 45-year-old truck driver from Fort Myers received serious injuries when his tractor-trailer carrying 8,500 gallons of fuel jack-knifed and overturned near the Toledo Blade exit.

On Jan. 10, a 47-year-old Cape Coral man died when he lost control of his southbound car near the Toledo Blade exit, veered off the highway, struck a guard rail, overturned and struck a concrete bridge.

Stublen said the FDOT staff feels anguish when it hears of a death on a state highway not just because of the life that is lost but “the (surviving) husband or wife — or the kids who lost a parent. There's a void that can never be replaced.”

Watson said the FHP can only repeat its warnings about distracted driving and hope more people will take heed.

“We'll repeat it as much as we have to.”

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