



Other Viewpoints

Highway safety needs another look

The Kansas Turnpike Authority estimates that about 10 lives are saved and countless serious injuries are avoided each year by the concrete barrier walls it constructed in the early 1990s in the median of the 236-mile toll road.

Officials of the Missouri Department of Transportation recently estimated that cable barriers in the median of multi-lane highways in that state save 40 to 50 lives a year. Cable barriers were installed along Interstate 70 in Missouri in 2006; traffic deaths from crossover accidents have fallen from 24 in 2002 to just one in 2009.

After three fatal crossover accidents on Kansas Highway 10 in the last nine months, it's time to take another look at barriers that stop vehicles that are headed across the median into oncoming traffic.

In response to a plea from Eudora Mayor Scott Hopson, Gov. Sam Brownback has ordered the Kansas Department of Transportation to begin immediately designing a project to widen the shoulders and add rumble strips on K-10 in Douglas County. Those improvements already have been made along the highway in Johnson County.

That's a first step, but Brownback also has instructed KDOT to revisit a 2008 study on the suitability of cable barriers in the K-10 median. Based on traffic and accident counts in the 2008 study, KDOT rejected cable barriers for K-10, but approved them for 1 mile of U.S. Highway 75 in Topeka and 4 miles of Kansas Highway 96 in Sedgwick County.

We don't know much about those highways, but we have some experience with K-10. Even when no cars are crossing the median and causing head-on accidents, the speed and volume of traffic on this highway already create a hazard, especially during peak commuting hours. That hazard is multiplied by the behavior of drivers who weave in and out of traffic and succumb to a variety of driving distractions. Regular commuters on that route have many stories to tell about seeing drivers eating, applying makeup, talking on cell phones, texting and even reading the newspaper while speeding down the highway.

Cables or some other kind of barrier won't address all the K-10 driving hazards, but they probably would have saved at least one life on that highway recently. Five-year-old Cainan Shutt died when a car driven by 24-year-old Ryan Pittman ran through the median and struck the minivan driven by Cainan's step-grandfather. Cables reportedly provide a less damaging stop than concrete barriers, but it's hard to know whether Pittman might have survived a collision with a cable barrier. However, it's almost certain that the cables would have stopped his car before it collided with the minivan in which Cainan was riding.

That fatal crash has drawn much-needed attention to safety issues on K-10. Whether or not a cable barrier is the best option for this stretch of highway, the governor was right to instruct KDOT officials to revisit this issue and consider additional safety measures for this heavily traveled route between Lawrence and Kansas City.

— The Lawrence Journal-World, via The Associated Press

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COLBY FREE PRESS

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Colby, Kan. 67701 fax (785) 462-7749

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THE COLBY FREE PRESS (USPS 120-920) is published every Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, except the days observed for Memorial Day, Independence Day, Labor Day, Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Day and New Year's Day, by Nor'West Newspaper, 155 W. Fifth St., Colby, Kan., 67701.

PERIODICALS POSTAGE paid at Colby, Kan. 67701, and at additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Colby Free Press, 155 W. Fifth St., Colby, Kan., 67701.

THE BUSINESS OFFICE at 155 W. Fifth is open from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday to Friday, closed Saturday and Sunday. MEMBER OF THE ASSOCIATED PRESS, which is exclusively entitled to the use for publication of all news herein. Member Kansas Press Association and National Newspaper Association.

SUBSCRIPTION RATES: In Colby, Thomas County and Oakley: three months \$35, one year \$85. By mail to ZIP Codes beginning with 676 and 677: three months \$39, one year \$95. Elsewhere in the U.S., mailed once per week: three months \$39, one year \$95. Student rate, nine months, in Colby, Thomas County and Oakley, \$64; mailed once per week elsewhere in the U.S. \$72



Misstep makes travel challenging

As vacations go, this one didn't start so well. As I was getting out of the hotel van at the Denver airport, the driver put down a big plastic stool for us to step on. Nice touch, I thought.

As I stepped down, though, carrying my computer and some odds and ends of reading material, the stool slipped, my right leg went back and I could feel my hamstring muscle let go.

I've done this once before. I know what it feels like. Intense pain, quivering muscles, you can hardly walk. At that point, in fact, I could have crawled out of the way of an oncoming bus, maybe. A slow one.

Hobble was more than I could take. We made it upstairs, where Cynthia asked the airline to give me a wheelchair ride through security. Boy, was that fun. Fast, anyway.

At the "A" terminal checkpoint, the airline person wheeled me to a special lane reserved for the handicapped. It was a new experience, being pampered by the Transportation Security Administration.

I still had to stand and empty my pockets, take my shoes off, toss my phone in the bin, the usual stuff. The woman at the metal detector asked if I had a hip implant. I tried to explain, but mostly she was just afraid I was going to fall down on her. I'm sure I looked awful, as much pain as I was having.

From security, I got to ride an electric cart to the gate. Did you know they have a special elevator for those things? You drive the big ol' cart in one end, park, push the button, then drive off the other end.



Steve Haynes

- Along the Sappa

Who could have guessed?

I got to the gate ahead of Cynthia, but then she had to explain why she was going through security with four carry-on bags, two big and two small. And stop at McDonalds for breakfast. Couldn't carry coffee, so we did without.

I worried about how the leg would do, sitting in an airline seat for three hours. Turns out, it didn't seem to mind. The angle and position were perfect to avoid pain. Hobbling off the plane was a different matter, however. Then I got to be wheeled through another airport.

My stack of papers got left on the plane. Frontier couldn't find them. Maybe they wound up in Denver. I'll check on the way home, but most of them had been waiting so long to be read I'll never miss them anyway.

The van ride downtown and to Miami Beach was uneventful and fairly pain-free. Had to hobble into the hotel. Dinner that night, we were on our own. Went downtown by cab to a place the kids recommended; it was great. Only problem was it's located halfway between cab stands on the mall. In and out, those were two loooong blocks on a quivering, painful leg.

That evening, I learned I had mistakenly packed chino shorts in place of my chino pants.

Oops. Next day, we went back to the mall and had to walk two blocks to the Gap for pants. Afternoon thunderstorm moved in; it poured. Couldn't run; had to just stay put at a bar.

No pants my size. Gap too youth oriented. Two more blocks to Macy's, where they prided themselves in having my size. Had to roll pants up, but they looked and felt nice at the rehearsal dinner.

Next day, we had to go back to get the bag Cynthia was too cheap to buy the first time. I smiled and said yes, bless her little heart.

This time I walked six blocks. After lots of hot baths and heavy doses of ibuprofen, the leg is getting better every day.

I think I am lucky, especially after seeing the size of the bruise emerging from within on the fourth day. I keep soaking, massaging, medicating and walking. It keeps getting better.

The drive to Jacksonville, clean across the state, was at least heck, however. The leg was really stiff and sore after eight hours in the back seat. Just sore, though. Not painful.

The whole thing has given me more appreciation for people who live in a wheelchair. I can sympathize more nearly with their plight.

People who live with pain year after year have my respect as well. At least I know I'll get better.

Meantime, the leg gives me something to complain about.

Other than that, it's been a great trip, by the way.

Steve Haynes is president of Nor'West Newspapers. When he has the time, he'd rather be reading a good book or casting a fly.

GED not equivalent to diploma

So what if less than 70 percent of our high school students graduate. Many of those dropouts go back to get a "GED." They are high school graduates, too; they just take longer to learn. Right?

Research says otherwise.

Some students think the General Educational Development test will lead to a job equal in pay to other high school graduates, open the door to college and be just as good as a high school diploma for getting into the military. Research shows that each of these ideas is wrong. The possibility of taking the test may actually encourage students who are struggling with coursework to drop out of high school.

The General Educational Development credential is issued based on an eight-hour subject-based test that claims to be equivalent to traditional high school in content and rigor. In 2008, nearly 500,000 dropouts took and passed the test nationwide. This is about 12 percent of the high school credentials given that year.

In Kansas, only 3,102 students received GEDs last year. Kansas has a lower per capita rate of GED-taking.

In National Bureau of Economic Research article No. 16064, "The GED," authors Heckman, Humphries and Mader researched the academic literature on the GED. They found "minimal value of the certificate in terms of labor market outcomes...." In other words, GED recipients usually had a low income similar to those who never graduated from high school.

GED students going to college fared no better: "... only a few individuals successfully use it as a path to obtain post-secondary credentials."



John Richard Schrock

- Education Frontlines

Why is a test that is purported to be as rigorous as high school failing to certify students who can actually perform as well as regular high school graduates? The researchers found: "Although the GED establishes cognitive equivalence on one measure of scholastic aptitude, recipients still face limited opportunity due to deficits in non-cognitive skills such as persistence, motivation and reliability."

In plain language, four years of high school also teaches you to show up on time, day after day, and follow through until you get the job done. Simply, seat time and the high school experience do count.

The military knows this. "Tier 1" candidates are those with traditional high school diplomas. Those with GEDs (along with online school "diplomas") are ranked as "Tier 2." According to a feature in the March 7 Pittsburgh Tribune-Review linked to Education Week, reporter Amy Crawford found military recruiters limited admissions from "Tier 2" students: Army and National Guard (10 percent); the Navy (5 percent); and the Air Force (1 percent).

The GED (which is only offered in the U.S. and Canada) may actually be the reason some students decide to drop out, the researchers said. Heckman and his fellow researchers

found: "... through its availability and low cost, the GED also induces some students to drop out of school."

So if students believe they can make as much money, or succeed just as well in technical school or college with a GED, this belief gives them a way to rationalize dropping out in the short term. If they realized that in fact they would still likely earn as little as other high school dropouts, or that their chance of succeeding in post-secondary school was far less, or their admission to the military is limited, more students might stay in high school and get a diploma.

John Richard Schrock, a professor of biology and department chair at a leading teacher's college, lives in Emporia. He emphasizes that his opinions are strictly his own.

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