

Highway 2 work planned

Full story:

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A combination of new signs, wider rumble strips with double striping and increased law enforcement between Monroe and Gold Bar should dramatically lower the fatality rate on Highway 2, state officials say.

Gov. Christine Gregoire unveiled a \$3.6 million highway-safety plan Monday, only weeks after personally traveling the road commonly referred to as the "Highway of Death" and meeting with activists who have called for improvements for years.

Gregoire said the road will be added to the state's traffic-safety-corridor list, which designates roads with the highest collision and fatality rates and makes them eligible for improvement. To start, the state will add signs alerting drivers to the dangers of the road.

It will also add 24-inch rumble strips -- bumpy strips of pavement that cause noise and vibration when drivers drift onto them -- along with reflectors and permanent, double striping next spring between Monroe and Gold Bar. A standard, nine-inch rumble strip will be added between Gold Bar and Stevens Pass.

Finally, the Washington State Patrol will put more motorcycle units along the route in an effort to reduce the number of drunken, sleepy and sometimes testy drivers traveling the road.

Statistics show that the majority of accidents in the corridor -- more than 2,600 between Interstate 5 and Stevens Pass since 1999 -- are because of drunken driving, people falling asleep at the wheel or others aggressively trying to pass a slower vehicle. Of those, about 40 have resulted in fatalities, claiming nearly 50 lives.

Funding for the project is split among local, state and federal money. Snohomish County set aside \$1.5 million for highway improvements more than a year ago, and this past legislative session, the state offered about \$700,000. The recent availability of \$1.4 million in federal money is what allows the project to move forward, Gregoire said.

Similar improvements on other state highways named to the safety-corridor list have resulted in a 34 percent reduction in fatalities, Gregoire said.

Community activists said they were pleased with the announcement. "This is a very good first step to eliminate those issues [leading to collisions]," said Fred Walser, former Sultan police chief and chairman of the U.S. 2 Safety Coalition. "But it isn't going to replace the lost loved ones."

The state will continue to assess improvement, mostly aimed at reducing congestion on the highway, officials said. Gregoire mentioned future slow-vehicle turnout lanes and said voters could help by approving the "Roads & Transit" tax proposal on the Nov. 6 ballot, which includes money for a Monroe bypass.

Otherwise, it could be some time before more is done as gas-tax collections have been less than forecast, she said.

More than \$1 billion in improvements were identified for the highway between Snohomish and Skykomish in November 2006 as part of a route-development plan being designed by the state Department of Transportation.