

EDITORIAL

Off guard

Safety barrier on the road continues to be neglected



The Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT) has decided to leave roadkill where it's at this fiscal year. Many transportation agencies in the U.S., including IDOT, have left guardrail fighting for its life on the road for a lot longer.

Everywhere I travel by car I see the safety device with either an incurable case of rust or a paralyzing blow to its frame. It's obvious that guardrails need some intensive care, and the industry is there trying to hold its hand through the trauma.

The American Traffic Safety Services Association and others are trying to install language into the next reauthorization bill that would push over more funding to the maintenance and replacement needs of guardrail.

"In an ideal world maintenance crews, regardless of the state, would react to [guardrail maintenance] in a timely basis, and timely is a relative term," John Durkos, vice president of technical support and marketing for Road Systems Inc., told *ROADS & BRIDGES*. "But the reality is states are being asked to do so much with less and guardrail sometimes is a victim of priorities."

Which brings us back to the IDOT decay dilemma. Due to a bionic winter that left an endless supply of potholes and rising fuel costs, IDOT announced it would no longer patrol the streets clearing roadkill. If the death of an animal is causing a traffic concern it will act accordingly, but due to fiscal demands elsewhere the state agency is letting the task rot. With many other DOTs facing the same drop in dollars it makes me wonder how attentive they are to perhaps the most important safety device out on the roadway.

However, even when maintenance crews are on top of their game there seems to be some confusion of the rules. According to Durkos, the Federal

Highway Administration's guidelines on whether or not to replace damaged sections of guardrail come with a gray area the size of a suburban subdivision.

A current NCHRP project (22-23) carries the objective of developing quantitative guidelines for crews on when to replace after an impact.

The NCHRP study also involved a 50-state survey that attempted to track the rituals of DOTs. Some have a sophisticated system in place and check on an annual basis, while others ignore until the call turns into a scream.

The other problem with the FHWA booklet is it was printed over a decade ago, so a sharper revision is in order.

The FHWA and the U.S. DOT need to be more active than printing a few pages every 10 years. There should be federal requirements much like what is going on regarding worker safety on most jobsites. On the Dan Ryan Expressway project here in Illinois, inspectors routinely walked the site and handed out citations if necessary. I think federal workers should ride the line of the road at least every five years to make sure every linear foot of guardrail is holding up. State DOTs would be responsible for the time in between the official visits, but there also would be that surprise appearance to keep maintenance crews at the ready.

Guardrail is designed to take the severity out of car crashes. Weak points in the system only increase the chance of more roadkill. Nobody wants to be responsible for that cleanup. **ST**

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bill Wilson".

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