

Work Zone Week 'drives' home awareness

— By Ashley Sanders
The Orange Leader

Cell phones, mascara and loud, loud tunes. These are the distractions that Eric Patin and his crew battle each day.

The orange vest clad men are not themselves talking on the cell phones while applying make up and turning up the car stereo. They are the workers that thousands of motorists pass each day in road construction zones — many times without even a second thought.

“My biggest concern is getting home each day,” Patin said as he monitored his crew’s progress on FM 347 Monday morning. “Everybody is always in such a hurry. I have a family too and I want to go home to them every night, the same as you.”

The Texas Department of Transportation wants motorists to keep Patin, as well as other drivers, in mind when traveling through work zones along state roads and highways.

That’s why across the country, people are recognizing National Work Zone Awareness Week, now through April 6.

“We have put 154 traffic cones outside our building this week to honor those who died last year in work zone related accidents in Texas,” Marc Shepherd, TxDot public relations officer, said outside the Beaumont office Monday morning. “These are not just workers. They are regular motorists too. These cones are here because they are your moms, your dads, your brothers and your sisters.”

According to Shepherd, drivers face more risk in work zones than the crews assigned to repair the roadways.

“We are just trying to bring awareness to our drivers that hey, our guys are out there. So look out for them. And, we want them to see the work zone dangers for themselves and other drivers,” he said.

John Barton, TxDot district engineer for Beaumont, added to Shepherd’s comments by cautioning drivers to slow down and drive safely through work zones.

“Our goal is to bring home the idea of driving safely in construction zones and bring everyone’s families and loved ones home safely,” Barton said.

Back at the Nederland work site, Patin said he cautions the “new guys” to always look out for drivers and to never turn their back on traffic.

“I have been bumped by a car before. It’s a frightening experience,” he said. “What people don’t understand is an orange cone will not stop a car. I try to preach safety as much as possible to my guys.”

What Patin said he hopes motorists will understand, is that the TxDot crews are there for the public.

“We are here for you,” he said. “Be aware of us and give us respect on the roadway.”

In Texas, 154 people died in work zone wrecks in 2005. Nationwide, about 50,000 people lost their lives. Texas ranks third behind California and Florida in work zone fatalities.

For more information on TxDot and road delays, visit www.txdot.gov or call 898-5745.