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Officials: 'Skidabraded' interstate is saving lives

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Nine months after the Texas Department of Transportation roughened Kilgore's two-mile stretch of Interstate 20, local officials say the process has clearly saved lives.

Kilgore police officers and firefighters began taking the lead at incidents on I-20 after Kilgore City Council members added a portion of the roadway through their annexation of 961-acres to the north in late July of 2012.

The new workload was significant, Mayor Ronnie Spradlin said.

"The number of wrecks that occurred – often in rain and often with single-vehicle wrecks



COURTESY image from SKIDABRADER.COM

The Skidabrader unit used by Texas Department of Transportation on Kilgore's portion of Interstate 20 in January is credit with a drastic reduction in wrecks.

– seemed to be way out of proportion to the small bit of roadway we were patrolling," he explained. "Our police felt unsafe

on the highway working one wreck, afraid there'd be another

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one. At times there were multiple wrecks in that one small stretch.

In a six-month period following the annexation, KPD tracked 72 incidents in Kilgore's portion of the interstate, many of them occurring in inclement weather. Among the total incidents, 58 were crashes, one of them fatal.

In the six months after TxDOT's Skidabrader blasted its metal pellets at the road surface, the total number of recorded incidents was cut in half and crashes were reduced by almost 71 percent.

"After the outstanding results and reduction in accidents that Kilgore achieved after the Skidabrader improved the traction on the part of I-20 in the city limits, it looks like a wonderful method to be used on even more of the interstate to increase safety and reduce wrecks."

In the weeks and months after following the annexation, it quickly became clear there was a problem, Kilgore City Manager Scott Sellers said.

"I referred to that area in every conversation as 'the Bermuda Triangle of I-20,'" he recalled, an unexpected aspect of the city's growth to the north. "I did not regret the annexation. If anything, I was grateful that there was now an additional set of eyes on the problem. Looking back on the accident history, recognizing that it was a very significant issue, that outside of our jurisdiction we just did not understand ... it was providential that we annexed that ar-

ea when we did to undoubtedly save the lives that have been saved."

Heading into the annexation, city leaders adjusted KPD and Kilgore Fire Department's coverage to account for the new jurisdiction but were surprised and concerned at the amount of attention the interstate required. They soon adopted a 'box strategy,' dividing the approximately two-mile stretch into six quick-response zones, three on either side of the interstate between Hwy. 135 and FM 2087.

"Police and fire had to adjust coverage specifically to address I-20 accidents, even going so far as to establish a first-response team during times of inclement weather," Sellers explained.

The vast majority of the incidents occurred during rain, KPD Chief Todd Hunter noted, causing chain reactions.

"We know that for a fact. We tried to staff accordingly when we could see that we were going to have severe weather during those periods of time," he said. "Unfortunately, several of those accidents caused other accidents.

"We were spending an inordinate amount of time out there, especially in wet conditions, because of accidents and that took us away from

our mission in the city."

According to Sellers, the problem hit home when he rode along with firefighters to a reported SUV rollover wreck in early August – in that incident, a woman was killed when she was thrown from the vehicle after a tire blowout. Her 3-year-old son, also ejected, died days later.

It was a disturbing, heartbreaking episode, he said.

"That whole scene impacted me where I would not rest until something was done."

Sellers began a series of e-mails and conversations with TxDOT representatives and, subsequently, with District 7 Rep. David Simpson and his staff members, raising the issue during 'Listening Day' at the capitol.

"Something had to be done," he said. "Every time it rained, the first responders would say, 'Oh no, I-20.' They would just know that there would be some major accident, and almost every time without fail there was not just one but multiple accidents in inclement weather."

On a rainy Friday in late December, local emergency responders attended five one-vehicle wrecks on I-20 within the span of a few hours, four of them inside the city limits

with one fatal wreck about a half-mile east of FM 2087.

TxDOT's inspection of the roadway confirmed Kilgore officials' fears.

"We were seeing what was called surface polishing," said Larry Krantz, spokesman for the agency's Tyler division. "It's just where the pavement starts to wear. That's been ongoing: I-20 is something we're never going to be able to quit working on. The job is never done. Everything out there has a limited lifespan because of the traffic.

"It was a good opportunity to go in there and make it a little rougher, provide some more traction."

Krantz compared the Skidabrader to sandblasting on a much-larger scale, bombarding the road surface with BBs to abrade the pavement.

"It's a tool that we can use in our toolbox. In the process of abrading the pavement, it's not a permanent fix by any stretch but pavement's not designed to be permanent."

The Skidabrader process took three days in late January: the improvement was immediate, Sellers said.

"The first major rainstorm following the Skidabrader, we waited, we held our breath waiting for the emergency tone to dispatch our emergency responders to I-20, and it never came. That was when I knew the Skidabrader was a success and I-20 was no longer a threat to our citizens."

Increasing the friction on the

roadway made the difference, KPD Assistant Chief Roman Roberson said. It's the only factor that changed.

"We were very thankful. That was definitely a large workload on us, having to work that many and address that many incidents on I-20. I would have to give the kudos to the city manager, working with TxDOT and having them understand the need and getting the job done."

Sellers, for his part, credits Simpson and TxDOT for recognizing the importance of the issue and mobilizing quickly to address it.

"Their actions have saved lives," he said.

The Skidabrader has been used in multiple locations in Gregg County, Krantz said. Currently, TxDOT has no set timetable for rolling it out again.

"It's a tool in the toolbox," he repeated. "We've gotten pretty good life out of what pavement has been replaced in Gregg County recently.

As for Kilgore's I-20 stretch, "At some point, that pavement in there will be ground up and relaid and hopefully it will be even better than the Skidabraded pavement. But I don't have a timeline on that."

The technology has proved invaluable, Hunter said.

"A 71 percent decrease – isn't that awesome? It was able to reduce the amount of accidents, reduce the risk to the motorists as well as free up officers within the city to maintain their patrol zones and maintain coverage in the city."

"I REFERRED TO THAT AREA IN EVERY CONVERSATION AS 'THE BERMUDA TRIANGLE OF I-20' ... SOMETHING HAD TO BE DONE."

Kilgore City Manager Scott Sellers