The idea of constructing crossovers between lanes on the Atchafalaya Basin bridge to divert traffic after wrecks has been revived and soon will become reality, says the head of the state highway department.

Neil Wagoner, secretary of the Department of Transportation and Development, told The Advertiser Monday that DOTD is completing design work on three crossovers to allow traffic off the bridge in emergency cases.

The crossovers will “connect the two causeways so if there’s an accident people are not locked in there for eight or nine hours,” as has happened, Wagoner said.

Previous plans for crossovers were cancelled in August 1987 under a different DOTD administration. Former bridge design engineer Louis Garrido said the project was too expensive and details could not be worked out as to who would have authority over the crossovers.

Garrido estimated the cost as $10 million for each crossover because complete interchanges would have to be built.

But Charles Higgins, head of the bridge design section, says the total cost will be about $2.3 million for constructing three crossovers, which will link the spans. Federal funds will pay 90 percent of the cost.

“It’s not cheap,” he said. “But we could save lives with it and when you’re talking about saving lives, I don’t know how you could put a price tag on that.”

Bids for the construction should be ready in January and construction should start in February or March, Higgins said.

Crossovers will be built between the beginning of the bridge and Butte LaRose on the Lafayette side, between Butte LaRose and Whiskey Bay and another between Whiskey Bay and Grosse Tete.

The interchanges will remain closed when there is no emergency, Higgins said, and will be opened to allow emergency vehicles access to wrecks on the on-coming lanes. After the emergency vehicles have secured the scene, traffic can be diverted to the opposite side if needed.

Wagoner said one factor that caused the previous administration to drop the idea was safety. “Early on we had some concern about safety,” including the possibility that the crossovers would be used for U-turns and cause even more wrecks. State police wanted them left open so patrol cars could “hide in there and catch speeders.”

The National Transportation Safety Board has recently given its approval for the construction.

Similar interchanges are planned for an elevated stretch of I-10 between Baton Rouge and LaPlace, Higgins said.

Wagoner said call boxes similar to those installed on the Atchafalaya Basin bridge earlier this year also will be installed on the interstate near LaPlace.

The boxes have proven an effective safety measure for motorists, Wagoner said. State police, ambulances and tow trucks are able to respond much more quickly to emergencies and breakdowns and might have prevented more serious wrecks.

“People who travel along that long stretch of causeway in recent years have said ‘What would happen to me if I broke down?’ There’s no way to call anyone. The call boxes have added a measure of safety and security,” he said.

Wagoner said he has received requests for the boxes on other interstates but he does not believe they are needed. The elevated spans where they are now located are isolated and motorists who have trouble have no other way to call for assistance.