Interstate proposal scrapped

By MIKE HASTEN
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BATON ROUGE — Plans to build crossovers between lanes on the Atchafalaya Basin bridge have been scrapped, a state highway official says, but another plan to clear traffic following wrecks is being put into place.

Traffic often is tied up for hours when collisions block both lanes of the high-rise freeway. Emergency vehicles have trouble getting to the wreck sites and several people who have stopped for wrecks in front of them have been killed by vehicles that did not stop in time.

The Department of Transportation and Development had planned to construct crossovers so blocked traffic could be diverted to the other lanes but that proved to be too expensive, says Louis Garrido, DOTD bridge design engineer. Each crossover would have cost about $10 million because complete interchanges would have to be built.

Instead, a simpler form of crossover soon could be put out for bids which will alleviate the problem somewhat, Garrido said.

The different type of crossovers will provide an area where wrecked vehicles can be moved to allow traffic to return to normal. Wreckers would remove the smashed cars after the traffic jam cleared.

The new plan could be let for bid soon but an administrative problem is tying up the works, Garrido said.

"The main problem has been with the operation of it," he said. "Who's going to respond to what? Who's going to pay for what?"

The first step of the plan will be taken Aug. 26, Garrido said. Bids will be let for the installation of telephones along the bridge so motorists with mechanical problems or witnesses to wrecks can call for help.

Several small towns along the interstate have stopped responding to calls for fires on the highway because of the costs. Also, there's a jurisdictional squabble between police agencies, fire departments and ambulance services.

One of the big problems, Garrido said is "Who's going to be in charge or command?" plus "there's never been a true consensus on what to do.

"We have to have answers from the state police. Once they iron out all the difficulties, we'll have a well-oiled operation. But how long it's going to take, I don't know."

The department said the plan also includes eventual installation of devices warning of low visibility due to fog and of blocked traffic so drivers can take a different route.