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Death road

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A crash that left three dead is one of several on McKay Road in the past year, prompting authorities to search for ways to reduce speed in the corridor



Three individuals were killed in a collision of two vehicles in late March on McKay Road, just east of the thoroughfare's junction with Highway 219 and north of St. Paul.

The Marion County Sheriff's Office has identified the drivers, two of whom were in a pickup truck that collided with a box van, which had a single occupant. According to the MCSO, investigators believe Jorge Valdez-Espinoza, 26, of Newberg, was driving his Chevy truck west on McKay Road at a high rate of speed when he collided with an east bound box van, killing him instantly.

The crash killed the driver of the van, Joseph Ensign-Lewis, 33, of Portland, and the passenger in the Chevy truck, Leonel Sanchez-Jaimes, 21, of Salem.

"This tragic incident is a reminder for all drivers to please slow down and obey the rules of the road for the safety of all of Marion County's residents and visitors," a release from the sheriff's office stated.

Marion County Public Works Director Brian Nicholas said speed is usually the primary contributor to accidents on that road.

"There's a general consensus that folks drive that corridor much, much faster than basic rules," Nicholas said, adding that forensic examination of the accidents determined the vehicles in question were exceeding 70 mph. "And it's a two-lane corridor with no passing lanes. The only options to pass are in the street stretch. Folks get into trouble there."

Nicholas said the McKay Road corridor has a higher than average accident rate, and because of that, the county is constantly trying to find ways to reduce the number of crashes.

"So you put in improvements and monitor them to see if they are effective," he said, adding they have already put up additional signage in the area. "We'll monitor it and hopefully it will be effective in really reducing the crash rate."

Following the March fatality, Nicholas said the county will put up temporary warning signs for drivers on weekends, to remind them to be alert and slow down. He said they are also asking a contractor to install more rumble striping ahead of schedule. And they are planning to stripe the entire corridor from the freeway to I-5 with highly reflective striping. He said regardless of the time of day or the weather conditions, this new striping will be more visible to drivers.

Nicholas said the two best pieces of advice he has for drivers on the McKay Road corridor: slow down and stay alert. The corridor has its share of side roads and driveways. While most accidents are caused by drivers crossing over lanes to pass, he said an added hazard is a driver accessing the road via a side road or driveway.

"We're continuing to explore other improvements we can make on this and other corridors," he said. "We're trying to build a larger toolbox to address these in the future."

Bypass at fault?

North of the Willamette River Bridge, Highway 219 intersects the Newberg-Dundee bypass. McKay Road travels east and connects with Yergen Road and Ehlen Road, both country roads and the latter of which that intersects with I-5 and Highway 99E at the north end of Aurora.

ODOT data indicates that traffic on Highway 219 between the river crossing and McKay Road increased 9 percent between October 2017 and October 2018, following the January 2018 opening of the bypass. While the bypass lessened traffic on the west side of the Willamette River, eastern residents raised concerns about increased traffic during a town hall in December in St. Paul.

"I don't think St. Paul was against the bypass; we just didn't want the traffic from the bypass to (affect) St. Paul," local resident Marcie Garritt said, describing a scenario where a motorist driving 70 mph crashed into cars when a local driver stopped to make a left turn.

During the town hall residents also raised concerns over commuter traffic through the area, many of whom aren't accustomed to driving on country roads.

According to ODOT information, crash rates across the state and region have been increasing, and the primary causes are tied to driver distraction and impairment. To combat this, rumble strips are often placed to alert drivers when they've crossed into a different lane. Intersection improvements have also been part of an engineering element of traffic safety.