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## Crashes surge around DFW Connector in Grapevine as construction complicates traffic



File/Staff Photo

DFW Connector construction, seen in November 2010, has made sweeping lane reconfigurations common on the tangle of state highways 114 and 121 north of D/FW Airport in Grapevine.

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Driving on state highways 114 and 121 north of Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport has become much more dangerous since the DFW Connector project began in February 2010.

Last year, the number of crashes in the tangle of highways was 52 percent higher than what researchers say it should have been without construction on the \$1 billion project.

The numbers surged 74 percent during nights and weekends, when crews are busiest.

Most of the increases involved noninjury wrecks, numbers from the Texas Transportation Institute's most recent crash data analysis show.

Overall, there were 787 crashes in the area around the project last year — 588 without injuries and 199 with injuries, according to the study. Rear-end collisions were by far the leading type of crash.

It was after seeing these rates remain high through multiple studies — the most recent published in March — that researchers decided to investigate the reason.

Now they think they know: It's you.

That is, drivers in the corridor are much more likely to be on the phone while driving than is average for North Texas, according to a recent report by Jason Crawford, research manager for the institute's North Texas office.

Just 6 percent of Dallas-area drivers use cellphones while driving, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. The TTI team found that twice that many, or 12 percent, were talking on the phone while driving through the DFW Connector, Crawford said.

And that, he noted, doesn't include drivers who were using hands-free devices, or checking email or sending texts from their lap.

A TTI press release about the report noted that "researchers concluded that the higher night and weekend crash numbers were the result of driver distraction,

since drivers failed to notice traffic flow changes resulting from lane and total freeway closures.”

It’s not certain that the higher number of crashes is related to distracted driving, however, because researchers counted the cars driven by phone users only during the day. Most of the increase in crashes has been at night, when contract rules permit the crews to close lanes and reconfigure traffic flow through the area.

Crawford said his team got a better tally by personally counting cars whose drivers were talking on the phone, because cameras and other technological shortcuts don’t work as reliably.

Another problem for drivers, and yet more reason to stay off the phone while in the area, is that the DFW Connector construction zone isn’t like the highway construction most drivers are familiar with. “It’s really different than what people have seen in the past,” Crawford said.

Traditional TxDOT projects involve a lot of orange cones and slowed traffic, he said. But they are much less likely to feature the type of sweeping lane reconfigurations that have been common during the connector’s construction.

The connector, like the North Tarrant Express and LBJ Freeway projects, is being built by construction firms that also have control over the highway’s design and the staging and timing for each segment.

When it is complete in early 2014, the DFW Connector will have smoothed out the infamous Grapevine Funnel and added continuous frontage roads through much of the area entire north of Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport.

At its widest point, the road will feature up to 14 general-purpose lanes in each direction. Managed toll lanes will be built in what is now the median along State Highway 114.

Unlike the North Tarrant Express project and the LBJ Freeway reconstruction in Dallas, the connector is being funded entirely through state gas tax dollars, state-backed bond money and \$250 million in stimulus money from the federal government.

But as with those two privately financed projects, the state has given the developers far more latitude in how to build the road. That has meant much more frequent changes to the lane configurations and other factors that drivers come to depend on.

That may also help explain the higher number of crashes, Crawford said.

### AT A GLANCE: More wrecks in 2010

A look at the percentage increase in accidents in the area of the DFW Connector project. Researchers looked at the number of crashes in 2010, compared with what would have been expected in the area over a three-year baseline period without the construction.

In 2010, crashes were up:

**1% for injury crashes** (199 in 2010, vs. 197.2 expected)

**83% for non-injury crashes** (588 in 2010, vs. 320.9 expected)

SOURCE: Texas Transportation Institute