

Easier access for fire hoses may help in I-95 emergencies

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Some strategically placed holes in the noise walls along Interstate 95 may help get traffic moving more quickly when things turn really hot on the highway.

It doesn't happen very often, but a vehicle that catches fire on I-95 or a fire in the brush fire near the interstate can cause significant delays for commuters.

The openings in the walls allow firefighters to connect hoses to hydrants on the other side of the barriers, providing a steady flow of water in an emergency.

"They're absolutely helpful," Boynton Beach fire-rescue spokesman Steve Lewis said. "When you look at these walls and how high they are, can you imagine getting a 5-inch hose over the top of them? They're invaluable."

In February, a smoldering fire in a truck carrying mulch and landscaping equipment shut down the northbound lanes of I-95 near Okeechobee Boulevard for several hours.

The 22-foot-talls barriers blocked fire fighters from getting to nearby hydrants to put out the fire more quickly.

The incident prompted the Florida Department of Transportation and its traffic management consultant to begin a survey of fire hydrants within 1,000 feet of I-95 in Palm Beach and Broward counties. A list should be ready this summer for fire-rescue crews and dispatchers.

It should help speed up the time it takes to douse fires on I-95 and get traffic back to normal, said Gaetano "Guy" Francese, the DOT's freeway operations manager.

Compiling the list is not as easy as it sounds because of the changing conditions along the highway.

On sections where the widening of I-95 was recently completed, there are green-and-orange signs on the noise walls marking the location of the fire hose holes. On walls built years ago, there are few signs to point out the openings or they've been covered over with landscaping.

In some areas without the sound walls, thick rows of trees and shrubs separate the highway from residential neighborhoods. How to get access to these hydrants poses a problem that's still being explored, said Gregg Letts, a highway engineer for consultant DMJM Harris.

Another issue is the noise walls on the west side of I-95, next to the railroad tracks used by Tri-Rail, Amtrak and CSX Transportation freight trains.

"I don't know how easy it is to make a call and shut down the railroad," Letts said.

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