

Stretch of I-95 to get better alert system

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Big overhead message signs that warn drivers about traffic delays and shutdowns will be coming to Interstate 95 in Palm Beach County in about two years.

Work is expected to begin in September on a \$25.2 million project to install 12 message signs - similar to the ones on Florida's Turnpike and I-95 in Broward County - and 46 traffic monitoring cameras, said Barbara Kelleher, spokeswoman for the Florida Department of Transportation.

The "intelligent transportation" improvements will replace the temporary signs and cameras that were placed along I-95 five years ago to help guide motorists through construction to widen the highway.

Those "smart zone" signs are portable and can be moved where needed, but can display only limited information and are occasionally out of order because of technical breakdowns. Drivers have complained that the signs are difficult to read and that they don't understand some of the abbreviations used.

The new system will be much more reliable and useful, according to state officials.

The signs will stretch above the highway and provide more detailed information on what lies ahead. Miles of fiber optic cables will be installed so the signs can be remotely controlled from the county's traffic management center.

The cameras will give traffic managers a full view of the 45-mile stretch of I-95 through the county, allowing them to detect incidents sooner and get the highway cleared faster.

State transportation officials also use the signs to provide safety information to motorists. Transportation Secretary Stephanie Kopelousos has approved messages to remind drivers to wear seat belts during next month's "Click It or Ticket" campaign.

The improvements will be made in two phases, DOT project manager Scott Burrie said. The section south of PGA Boulevard will be done first and should be in operation in 2010. North of PGA, the high-tech additions will come after the highway is widened to 10 lanes. Construction is scheduled to begin this summer and take about four years.

To reduce the time motorists sit idle in traffic, the state also plans to bring its quick-clearance program to I-95 this summer. Tow truck operators will be paid bonuses up to

\$3,500 to remove lane-blocking wrecks in 90 minutes or less. The companies can be fined if they take too long to reopen the roadway.

"Any minutes we can shave off a scene clearance, that's what we're trying to do," traffic management consultant Mike McGee said.

South Florida drivers spend an average of 50 hours a year stuck in traffic. The cost of the delays in lost productivity and wasted fuel figures out to about \$903 per person.

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