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## I-595 accidents on the rise

### Number of crashes is up slightly since construction began at the end of February 2010

By Michael Turnbull, Sun Sentinel

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Three major wrecks on Interstate 595 in the last four weeks have served as a major wakeup call for commuters.

It's not going to get any easier.

From now until 2014, I-595 will offer narrower lanes in spots, little or no shoulders and changing traffic patterns as Broward's only east-west expressway is modernized with more than \$1 billion in upgrades.

All it takes is one wreck to sour the day of thousands of drivers. Friday morning, for example, westbound I-595 was shut for nearly three hours after two separate pileups between the Pine Island Road and Nob Hill Road exits.

Ground zero for construction is near Pine Island Road and near the interchange with Florida's Turnpike. But by the end of the year, the entire 10.5-mile stretch of I-595 from east of State Road 7 to I-75 will be a work zone.

"The lanes have shifted and it's been challenging just staying in your lane and keeping track of where the lane is going," said John Sternal of Plantation, who commutes daily on I-595. "If this is only the beginning I'd hate to wonder what the commute will be like when the work is at full-speed."

Crashes on I-595 have increased 10 percent from March to September this year, compared with the same period in 2009. Construction began on February 26, 2010.

From March to September 2010, there were 272 crashes. For the same seven months in 2009, 247 crashes were recorded.

Two months — June and July — are responsible for most of the spike. In August, accidents decreased. And in September, there was only one more than last year. Numbers for October aren't available.

I-595 Express, a concessionaire headed by Spanish construction giant ACS Infrastructure Development, is rebuilding I-595 with reversible express lanes, crisscrossing ramps and new outside lanes to ease merging between interchanges.

In July 2009, the concessionaire took over running and maintaining I-595 for the next 35 years.

It now is responsible for everything from filling potholes, repairing guardrails and removing graffiti to picking up litter, monitoring traffic cameras and displaying messages on electronic signs. It also operates the Road Rangers around the clock on I-595, with a goal of responding to wrecks and disabled vehicles within 15 minutes. So far, officials say the courtesy patrol trucks are responding in less than five minutes.

The I-595 concessionaire is relying on an initiative that was developed by Florida's Turnpike in 2004 that gives towing companies bonuses for clearing major wrecks in 90 minutes or less, or charges them penalties if they don't.

It's called Rapid Incident Scene Clearance and it's usually reserved for wrecks involving big rigs and hazardous fuel spills that close or block lanes for an extended period.

It's been deployed three times on I-595 since July 2009, but not for any of the three wrecks this month that closed one side of the highway or blocked more than one lane.

Only minor injuries were reported in each case. But the impact on traffic was much more severe.

In the two pileups that occurred Friday, officials said it took longer than 90 minutes to reopen the westbound lanes because hazmat crews had to clean up 30 gallons of chlorine spilled from a pool-cleaning truck involved in the first wreck.

The truck was one of three vehicles involved. Five other vehicles crashed in a second pileup in an attempt to avoid the first crash. The pool truck driver and four drivers in the second pileup all were cited with failure to use due care.

Although the pileups occurred in the construction zone, troopers said construction itself was not a factor.

On October 19, a dump truck overturned in the median of eastbound I-595 at the Hiatus Road overpass after the truck's left front tire blew and the driver lost control. It took longer than 90 minutes to open all lanes because there was structural damage to the bridge.

On October 8, a horse trailer jackknifed on eastbound I-595 at Hiatus Road. The highway was reopened in 90 minutes.

Both the October 8 and 19 crashes occurred in an area that's not actively under construction.

"There are some circumstances such as when there is a fatality that we have to wait until troopers are finished gathering evidence before we are allowed to touch anything," said Catherine

Werner, operations supervisor for Jorgensen Contract Services, a subcontractor in charge of operations and maintenance of I-595.

"In other instances involving a hazmat spill or if there is structural damage, we can't open all lanes" in 90 minutes, she said.

Natalia Diaz, who drives I-595 from Weston to Plantation, said on-looker delays can just be as maddening for drivers on the opposite side of the highway where all lanes are open. Curious drivers slow down to look at the accident scene and the cleanup.

"Many of the shoulders are closed and it restricts emergency vehicles from getting to accident sites in an efficient manner," she said.

The normal posted speed limit on I-595 is 65 mph. But if workers are present and if lanes are closed, the 55 mph speed limit applies. Typically, this occurs only at night.

Fines automatically are doubled if you get pulled over for speeding in the construction area. A driver ticketed for going 15 to 19 mph over the speed limit will get a \$405 fine. If caught going 20 to 29 mph over the speed limit, you'll face a fine of \$455.

Florida Highway Patrol Sgt. Mark Wysocky said recent accidents are a reminder that drivers need to be patient and pay attention to signs.

"There are several different areas where lanes have been shifted," he said. "Not all areas are under construction and we're going to see a lot more."

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