

## INVESTIGATE REPORT

# Half of traffic deaths in rural areas

## Local officials say tight budgets hindering road safety improvements.

FRONT PAGE

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About half of the fatal motor vehicle crashes in the Miami Valley occur in rural areas, which transportation officials said demonstrates the crucial importance of investing in rural infrastructure.

But officials said shrinking transportation budgets make it financially impossible to upgrade the safety features on many of the region's rural roads, and motorists ultimately can have the largest impact on curbing fatal crashes in rural areas by driving in an alert and cautious manner.

Of the 60 fatal crashes in Montgomery, Miami, Greene, Butler and Warren counties so far this year, about 28 occurred in rural areas, according to data from the Ohio State Highway Patrol.

In 2010, 54 of the 96 fatal crashes in the five-county region occurred in rural areas.

The state determines whether the crashes occurred on urban or rural roads based on several variables, including the location of the crash and the type of road.

In Ohio, about 399 of the 572 fatal crashes this year occurred in rural areas of the state, resulting in 428 deaths, according to the Ohio State Highway Patrol.

The fatality rate on Ohio's rural, noninterstate roads is about 2.2 deaths per 100 million vehicle miles of travel, more than four times the death rate on all other roads in the state, said Frank Moretti, director of policy and research with TRIP, a nonprofit transportation research group based in Washington, D.C.

A TRIP study released this month found that Ohio in 2009 had the seventh highest number of traffic crashes on rural roads in the country with 601. Ohio, the seventh largest U.S. state, has 16,679 miles of rural roads.

Moretti said rural roads are more dangerous than interstate highways and city streets because motorists travel faster; the roads have fewer safety features; and the areas are typically isolated, meaning emergency-response agencies take more time to get to the scene of the crashes and begin lifesaving measures.

TRIP recommends that transportation agencies install rumble strips between lanes and along the side of rural roads to alert drivers that they are in danger, a strategy being employed by the Montgomery County Engineer's office. He said also that rural roads are safer when there are lane markings, prominent signage and paved shoulders. "Rural roads are a critical part of the state's transportation system," he said. "Rural America is the source of food, fiber and energy that drives the economy, and access to those products is absolutely critical."

Montgomery County Engineer Paul Gruner said county roads in rural areas are dangerous because of their "curvy geometry" and most do not have

adequate shoulders, which can turn a motorist's error into a deadly mishap.

Gruner said accidents can happen on any stretch of the 315 miles of county roads his department oversees, and his \$15 million budget does not have the money needed to install shoulders on every road. Most of the western half of the county is considered rural.

"We can't identify specific sites to target for safety improvements because the (crashes) are fairly well scattered over the road system," Gruner said.

He said his department's purchasing power is half what it was in 1993, and funding has not increased since then. About half of the department's budget is dedicated to paying for road improvement projects it bids out.

Gruner said his department will begin installing rumble strips and rumble stripes next year during its annual paving program. The strips and stripes, which are grooves that provide a rumbling sound and vibration to alert drivers of danger, could reduce the number of serious crashes.

"It will take us a while for us to get them on all of our roads, but if they are successful, we'll probably do a lot more of it," he said.

The rising cost of building materials and road repairs coupled with declining revenue means road departments are stretched thin and unable to afford to pay for many ambitious safety-improvement projects, said Paul Huelskamp, Miami County engineer.

"Every year, we are just able to do less and less," he said. Huelskamp said his staff at the county garage will drop to 26 people starting in January, down from 41 in 1996.

The Ohio Department of Transportation awards money to local jurisdictions with rural roads that have a crash rate for fatalities and incapacitating injuries that exceeds the state average. The funding can be used to widen road shoulders, install rumble strips and other warning devices, and construct safety features at high-crash locations, officials said.

Craig Eley, ODOT District 7 traffic engineer, said he is not sure why more jurisdictions have not taken advantage of the program, but he encourages local officials to apply for the money.

"There is not enough money in the budget to fix every road and line it up perfectly, but there is stuff that can be done on roads that are identified (as dangerous)," he said.

Additionally, ODOT is spending almost \$4 million to install rumble stripes on 1,335 miles of rural, two-lane roads across the state. The state's goal is to reduce crashes on Ohio's roads by 5 percent by 2015.

But Michelle May, ODOT's highway safety program manager, said there has been

The collage features several articles and sections from the Dayton Daily News. At the top left is a 'Your fall gardening to-do list' article. Next to it is a 'Low gas prices possible until Thanksgiving' article. To the right is a 'STORM CENTER 7 FORECAST' box showing a 55-38 degree forecast. The central part of the collage is the newspaper's masthead, 'Dayton Daily News', with the date 'THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 29, 2011' and the website 'BREAKING NEWS AT DAYTONDAILYNEWS.COM'. Below the masthead are several article teasers: 'Building Our Future' with a sub-headline 'Region lacks shared vision to accompany development', 'Maps prompt calls for reform', and 'Half of traffic deaths in rural areas'. At the bottom of the collage is an advertisement for 'BUYING DIAMONDS & SILVER' and 'INTERNATIONAL DIAMOND JEWELERS'.

more competition for safety funds as local governments scramble to balance their budgets.

"ODOT in the last couple of years has seen a significant increase in the number of local governments applying for the state and federal safety funds because of declining revenue," May said.

But, May said, Ohio has one of the largest road-safety programs in the country, spending about \$72 million annually on improving high-crash and severe-crash locations across the state.

Lt. Anne Ralston, public affairs commander with the OHP, said one of the best protections against fatalities on Ohio's roads are alert, cautious and sober drivers.

ODOT estimates about 90 percent of the state's crashes begin with some type of driver error.

Ralston said between 35 to 40 percent of the fatal crashes in the last five years involved alcohol.