

## Half of region's fatal crashes on rural roads

### Transportation officials say budget cuts delaying safety upgrades.

By **Cornelius Frolik** and **Tiffany Y. Latta**  
Staff Writers

Makeshift crosses, stuffed animals and flowers pay tribute to those who have been killed in crashes along Lower Valley Pike. The roadside memorials serve as reminders that the road along with Ohio 235 and other rural roads in Clark County are among the most dangerous roads to travel in the area.

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 66 fatal crashes in Clark, Montgomery, Miami, Greene, Butler and Warren counties this year, about 34 occurred in rural areas, according to data from the Ohio Highway Patrol.

In 2010, 68 of the 111 fatal crashes in the five-county region occurred in rural areas.

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

The fatality rate on Ohio's rural, non-interstate 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 study released this month by TRIP, a nonprofit transportation research group, 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 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.

Moretti recommends that transportation agencies install rumble strips between lanes and along the side of rural roads to alert drivers that they are in danger. He also said 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."

Clark County Engineer Johnathan Burr said county roads in rural areas are more dangerous because they were designed for horses and buggies and not for the volume of traffic or the speeds vehicles travel today. Burr also said the roads have a "curvy alignment" and lack shoulders.

"The alignment of the roads are generally more difficult to navigate than you're urban roads and highways," Burr said. "If you drift off of the highway while talking on your cellphone you have 10 or 12 feet before you get to gravel. You don't have that recovery zone on rural roads."

Clark County-Springfield Transportation Coordinating Committee Director Scott Schmid was not surprised by the high number of fatal accidents on rural roads. Ohio 235 has six of the most dangerous intersections in the county and there have been five fatalities on the road between 2008-2010, according to a new study by the TCC that ranks local traffic urban and rural "hot spots."

Intersections along Upper Valley Pike and Lower Valley Pike also rank high, with 20 injury accidents occurring on Upper Valley Pike and U.S. 40 in three years. Seven injury accidents occurred on Lower Valley Pike and Spangler Road in Medway.

Schmid said higher speeds and poor lighting play a role in the increased severity of the accidents.

Montgomery County Engineer Paul Gruner said accidents can happen on any stretch of the 315 miles of county roads his department oversees, and his budget does not have the money needed to install shoulders on every road. About 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.

Gruner said his department's purchasing power is all what it was in 1993, and funding has not increased since then. About half of the department's \$15 million budget is dedicated to paying for road improvement projects, he said.

Gruner said his department will begin installing rumble strips and rumble stripes next year during its annual paving program. He said 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 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 funding 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 the shoulder, install rumble strips and other warning devices at high-crash locations, officials said.

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### In the news Wednesday

#### Cost of health insurance up for workers

Health insurance cost for workers is expected to rise 10 percent this year, according to a new study by the Kaiser Family Foundation. The study found that the average family will pay \$12,000 for health insurance in 2011, up from \$10,800 in 2010. The study also found that the cost of health insurance is rising faster than wages, which could lead to more people losing their health insurance. **By Laura A. Bluhm**

### NATION & WORLD

#### New budget fights ahead in Congress

House and Senate leaders are expected to announce a new budget plan in the coming weeks. The plan is expected to include cuts to social security and other major programs. **By Laura A. Bluhm**

### SPORTS

#### Smith pulls double duty at Graham

Smith pulled double duty at Graham, scoring a goal and assisting another. **By Laura A. Bluhm**

### LOCAL & STATE

#### Storm water charges may fall

The state is expected to reduce storm water charges for residential properties. **By Laura A. Bluhm**

### LOCAL

#### Area postal service workers rally

Area postal service workers held a rally to protest their working conditions. **By Laura A. Bluhm**

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## Half of region's fatal crashes on rural roads

Transportation officials say budget cuts delaying safety upgrades.

**By Laura A. Bluhm**



Transportation officials say budget cuts are delaying safety upgrades on rural roads. A roadside memorial for a person who died in a crash on a rural road.

Year	Total	Rural	Urban
2008	11	6	5
2009	12	7	5
2010	11	6	5
2011	11	6	5
<b>Totals</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>20</b>

**Fiscal officer under fire for errors**

The fiscal officer of the state is under fire for errors in the state budget. **By Laura A. Bluhm**

### LOCAL & STATE

#### New Statehouse districts favor Republicans

New Statehouse districts were drawn that favor Republicans. **By Laura A. Bluhm**

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 it. "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. Fredrick Pausch, executive director of the County Engineers Association of Ohio, said about 23 counties last year received funding through the safety improvement program. Additionally, ODOT is spending about \$3.6 million to install rumble stripes on 1,335 miles of rural, two-lane roads across the state. Lt. Anne Ralston, public affairs commander with the Ohio State Highway Patrol, said one of the best protections against fatal tragedies on roads in Ohio are alert, cautious and sober drivers. She said between 35 to 40 percent of the fatal crashes in the last five years involved alcohol, and fewer deaths would occur if motorists obeyed the speed limit, did not drive while intoxicated and paid attention to signage and other vehicles. "The bread and butter of what the highway patrol does is rural traffic enforcement and crash reduction," she said. "Our troopers are always out there looking for crash causing violations."