

Houston & Texas News

Markers were installed last week on the Gulf Freeway frontage underpass at Tellepsen and a nearby site. Two people were trapped and died inside their vehicle during a rainstorm Oct. 16.

STEVE CAMPBELL: CHRONICLE



Nov. 6, 2006, 1:36AM

Markers placed both ways at underpass where 2 died

TxDOT official says flood-prone site also will have flashing lights and sensors next year

By RAD SALLEE

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Drivers approaching the deep underpass where the Gulf Freeway frontage roads dive under Tellepsen Street may notice a long-needed improvement that might have saved two lives had it been in place last month.

Two yardstick-like markers on the concrete wall, much like those installed along Hill Country streams to warn of flash floods, now show the depth of any water lurking at the bottom.

The markers were installed last week in both directions at two sites on the frontage road: at Tellepsen, where Patricia Gutierrez, 37, and her 16-year-old daughter, Melissa Rojas, were trapped and died inside their vehicle during a rainstorm Oct. 16, and nearby where the road passes under Lockwood.

Texas Department of Transportation spokesman Norm Wigington said both sites also will be outfitted in the spring with flashing lights and sensors that would activate the lights in the event of flooding.

Asked why this was not done sooner, Wigington said Tellepsen was not among the 25 most flood-prone underpasses on a list drawn up in the mid-1990s with input from law enforcement and flood-control officials.

Now, he said, TxDOT is again discussing with other agencies which underpasses are candidates for safety improvements.

"This technology has been funded under demonstration grants and has required the participating agencies, of which TxDOT is only one, to prioritize locations," he said.

In the 1990s, Wigington said, TxDOT installed water gauges and flashers at three local underpasses: the Katy Freeway frontage roads under the Sam Houston Tollway, Houston Avenue under Interstate 45 downtown, and Allen Parkway under Waugh Drive.

He said TxDOT wants to see hydrological studies before deciding where else to put sensors and lights. It will probably proceed to install the relatively inexpensive depth markers at all 38 locations in its six-county Houston district that are flood-prone enough to have pumps.

A tour last week of 15 heavily traveled Houston underpasses confirmed that a few more buckets of paint are needed. Eleven had neither depth markers nor flood warning signs.

Bright yellow and black depth markers have been in place for several years where Allen Parkway passes under Waugh and Montrose. And there are more to come.

Houston Public Works spokesman Wes Johnson said a \$5.6 million program is under way for drainage and safety improvements at the 13 underpasses maintained by the city.

"This work includes upgrades to the sizes of the pumps, new gauges which show the depth of the water, and flashing lights to be automatically activated when the system determines that the depth dictates that traversing is inadvisable," Johnson said.

He said four should be equipped by February: Allen Parkway at Waugh and Montrose, a rail bridge in the 6400 block of Jensen and a rail bridge on Lawndale near Goodyear and Texas 225. Nine others are scheduled for completion in mid-2008.

Johnson said he did not know whether the improvement program was triggered by any particular flood among the many that have struck the city in recent years, playing havoc with freeways and often taking lives.

"I think it's the fact that Houston will never be away from the possibility of the brief deluges that surprise us on almost a daily basis during the summer," he said.

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RESOURCES

NO WARNING SIGNS

A Houston Chronicle look at 15 heavily traveled underpasses that can flood during downpours found 11 with no flood warning signs or depth markers:

- Interstate 10 ramp to Smith
- I-45 ramp to Milam
- Travis ramp to I-45
- Louisiana ramp to I-10
- Judge Alfred Hernandez Tunnel on N. Main at Brooks
- Texas Avenue-Harrisburg under rail bridge
- Franklin-Navigation under rail bridge
- Houston Avenue under rail bridge
- Southbound Houston Avenue under I-45 (the northbound side had a "watch for water on road" sign)
- Old Spanish Trail under rail bridge
- Elgin under I-45.