

Driver says barrier saved his life

New system averted disaster, says driver

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A Calgary man says the new post-and-cable barrier recently installed in the median along the north end of Deerfoot Trail saved his life.

And, he said, it probably saved the life of another driver he might have hit head-on if not for the safety fence.

Earl Somerville, 58, was on a shopping errand Thursday afternoon, driving southbound on Deerfoot near 64th Avenue N.E. in the rain, when a hydroplaning pickup truck T-boned his SUV on the passenger side.

The force of the impact sent his vehicle into the median and smack into the barrier.

"Boy, coming at it I thought, 'Is this thing really going to hold,' " said Somerville.

"But it was gentle, like going into a cradle."

Somerville said that without the barrier, he's sure he would have ended up in the northbound lanes.

Construction began on the 10-kilometre barrier, stretching from 16th Avenue to Country Hills Boulevard, in January, and was completed last month.

It's believed this was the first time a vehicle has crashed into the new barrier.

Ald. Helene Larocque, who first started pushing for the median to be built two years ago, was happy to hear Somerville's story.

"I'm very pleased we could save a life because there's been a lot of lives lost on the Deerfoot over the years," said Larocque. "I just wonder how many more lives could've been saved if it had been built sooner."

Larocque said it's the first collision she's heard of in which the fence was needed, and police couldn't confirm Sunday if this was the first case.

There have been 10,000 collisions on Deerfoot Trail in the past five years, including 24 fatalities, according to the city.

And the province, which has jurisdiction over the freeway, says as many as 150,000 vehicles travel parts of Deerfoot each day, well over the capacity it was built to carry.

"Talking about safety on Deerfoot doesn't end here," said Larocque. "We need to do a full review because we have problems there from north to south."

Last week, police Chief Jack Beaton came out in support of the call for a safety audit of Deerfoot.

Somerville said his collision occurred because the driver of the truck that hit him appeared to be weaving across lanes out of frustration with the slow moving traffic.

"The No. 1 problem is semi trucks and others driving too slow," said Somerville. "They create bottlenecks and make some people impatient to get around. I would suggest that safety is reviewed on a regular basis, but driver behaviour has to be addressed."

Pieces of his vehicle such as a side mirror and part of his front bumper came off in the collision and a chunk of debris hit a car on the northbound side of Deerfoot.

"The driver came up to me upset that his car was hit and was talking about damages," said Somerville.

"One of the police officers just shook his head and said, 'if it wasn't for the barrier, we wouldn't be talking to you right now.'

"So that fence saved his life as well."

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