



Everything New Orleans

Airline Drive guardrail work complete in St. Charles Parish

By Matt Scallan, The Times-Picayune

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The 5.5-mile guardrail along Airline Drive in St. Charles Parish cost \$1.56 million.

A 5.5-mile **guardrail along Airline Drive** in St. Charles Parish designed to prevent motorists from plunging into a deep canal along the highway is substantially complete, according to the state highway officials.

Dustin Annison, a spokesman for the state Department of Transportation and Development, said the \$1.56 million project has undergone its final inspection and only awaits paperwork to be filed with the state to complete **the contract, which was awarded to RMD Holdings** last year.

"I think it's going to save a lot of lives," said St. Charles Parish Councilman Larry Cochran, assistant chief of the St. Rose Volunteer Fire Department.

Cochran said the barrier, which stretches from St. Rose to Norco, has stopped at least one vehicle from going into the canal just east of Ormond Boulevard in Destrehan about two months ago.

"The car hit the rail and rode up on it, but it didn't go in," Cochran said.

Yet another vehicle **jumped the barricade in December** and wound up in the murky water anyway.

Sandra and Allen Washington lost four children in an accident in 2003 after the car their oldest daughter was driving ended up in the canal.

"It's bittersweet," Sandra Washington said of the improvements. "It was a terrible tragedy for our family, but some good things came out of it that will save people's lives."

Many parish residents have been calling for a barrier for years, but State Police and transportation agencies were concerned that such a structure could hinder rescue efforts or that vehicles would hit a barrier and

bounce into oncoming traffic.

But after six people died in two accidents in 2003, the search for a solution began in earnest.

Ten median crossovers between Almedia Road and Norco were closed in 2004 and 2005. Turn lanes were extended at others, and markers were improved.

The efforts reduced the number of reported crashes into the canal from 15 to eight, over two three-year periods ending in 2006, But people continued to plunge into the water.

The last person to die in the canal was **Dorothy Mae Richard** of Montz, a retired postal worker whose car was clipped by another vehicle, sending it into the water on May 22.

The Washingtons still maintain a shrine to their children on the canal bank just east of Ormond Boulevard. Seven years after the tragedy, Allen still cuts the grass around the cross.

"There's not as much room to pull over," Sandra Washington said of the barrier. "I can't get out on the passenger side door anymore."

But people still remember.

"The anniversary was on Feb. 2," Sandra Washington said. "Some of Allen's friends pulled over on the other side of the road, ran across and put some flowers there."

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