

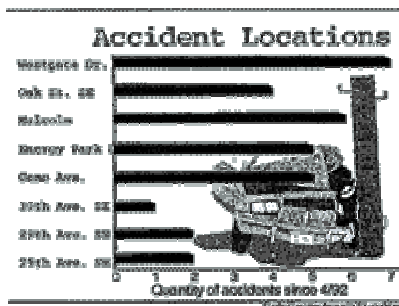
Transit Safety Is Up Due To Timed Lights

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Buses traveling down the Transitway often encounter lights just as they change. It isn't a matter of impeccable timing on the part of the drivers. It's part of a new light system installed at the roadside.

The lights, which were recently finished, were installed in response to an accident rate 30 percent higher than the state average. Since the Transitway was first used in 1992 there had been 32 accidents involving buses, other vehicles, and even one Rollerblader.



Since the lights were put into use last fall, there have been no accidents.

Michael Ramolae, assistant director of facilities for Parking and Transportation Services, said the feature is part of an ongoing plan to make the route safer.

"We are trying different techniques at different intersections," he said.

The lights are tripped by a combination of "loops" of fiber optic cable in the pavement and Autoscope cameras that send signals to the lights just seconds before the buses reach the intersections.

University bus drivers said the lights aren't the only precaution they are taking to avoid accidents.

Ken Ableman, a University bus driver who has driven the Campus Connector on the Transitway since it opened, said his supervisor keeps drivers in check by constantly reminding them to slow down.

"We're being more cautious now, too," Ableman said. "We know the lights are there, but we're being more cautious to keep accidents down."

Bill Kuusisto, who has been driving on the Transitway for three years, said he thinks the new system makes drivers more aware of the stoplights and buses.

Before the lights were installed, he never knew if the other drivers were going to follow necessary safety precautions, he said.

The plan for improving driving conditions on the Transitway has been in effect for more than two years. It began with a few basic steps such as changing signs at some intersections to eliminate non-bus traffic and trimming shrubs and trees to improve visibility.

The University Human Factors Research Laboratory also observed the reactions of drivers in buses and other vehicles at intersections on the Transitway.

The project is partially funded by the Minnesota Department of Transportation and is being researched by the University's Center for Transportation Studies.

"We want to see what kind of systems work; what kind of methods work to get people's attention," said Charles Cadenhead with the Office of Advanced Transportation Systems within the Minnesota Department of Transportation.

He also said this research could have applications throughout the state in similar situations such as railroad crossings. Researchers say this is an opportunity to evaluate different attention-getting devices and to use technology developed by the University, such as the Autoscope.

"We hope that these attention-getting lights will change patterns of drivers," said Lowell Benson, the coordinator for the University's Center for Transportation Studies.

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