

IN MY OPINION

Road Rangers save lives . . . and money

Posted on Sun, Apr. 20, 2008 By FRED GRIMM

She might as well have been clinging to a tree stump in the middle of a crocodile infested river. She was trapped, maybe forever, in the emergency lane.

The not-so-young woman stood by her immobile junker in that narrow refuge between the I-95 express lane and the battle-scarred concrete barrier. Trapped between the north-bound frenzy and the south-bound madness, she looked terrified.

Barreling past, I calculated her life expectancy. Decent. If a Road Ranger rides to the rescue.

With the coming budget cuts, her chances fade. Once the state eliminates the Road Ranger patrols, the little old lady's best hope for survival is to remain a perpetual fixture in no-man's land, living off food tossed by sympathetic commuters at 86 mph.

But granny's fix is beside the point. It's not as if the Road Ranger program was created as a feel-good amenity for those hapless motorists unable to grasp the meaning of *E* on their gas gauge. As if rangers are roving expressway concierges, packing gas cans, battery chargers and lug wrenches. Just a ripe \$21 million luxury item to be plucked from a tight budget.

SHE'S ROADKILL

The fact that Road Rangers might save the life of an occasional stranded grandma hardly matters in a year when drastic cuts to social services indicate legislators are willing to sacrifice the lives of foster children rather than raise taxes. Under that scenario, stranded granny gets relegated to roadkill without compunction.

Here's the real fallacy: Getting rid of Road Rangers makes for lousy economics.

The notion of our nice Road Rangers coming to the aid of befuddled motorists is "just a collateral benefit," said José Abreu, the former director of the Florida Department of Transportation, now running Miami International Airport. He was nearly apoplectic at the fiscal folly of eliminating the rangers, a program instituted in 1995, after all, to save money.

Their main job, Abreu said, frustration boiling over in his voice, was to get road debris and broken-down cars out of the way, to clear lanes, get traffic moving and save Floridians ``billions of dollars."

Every minute a disabled car sits on the expressway, he said, translates into four minutes of jammed-up traffic. The likelihood of that leading to another accident increases exponentially.

CRUNCH THE NUMBERS

Tim Lomax, an engineer with the Texas Transportation Institute, calculated that roadside assistance programs reduce expressway wrecks by 10 to 12 percent. Accidents mean more jams. A 2005 institute study found drivers in metropolitan Miami wasted 105,181,000 gallons of gasoline a year in expressway tie-ups and frittered away 150,146,000 pollution-spewing hours going nowhere.

Time is money. Wasted gasoline is big money. An institute study in 2003 put the saving-to-cost ratio of roadside assistance programs at from 3-to-1 to 10-to-1. In Florida, that means the \$21 million "savings" from cutting Road Rangers will cost us somewhere between \$62 million and \$210 million.

Abreu said the Road Rangers program was tantamount to adding another lane to a busy expressway. Without the construction costs. A cheap fix. A money saver.

Ysela Llorca, Miami-Dade's assistant county manager for transportation, agreed. ``This is not about giving people two gallons of gas or changing their tire."

The Miami-Dade Expressway Authority, she noted, intends to keep the Road Rangers patrolling its five locally controlled toll roads. The authority crunched the numbers. It can't afford not to.