

Danger zone

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During last spring's powerful ice storm, Proctor Volunteer Fire Department Chief Mick Ward found himself balancing unsteadily along the southbound lane of Interstate 35 near Midway Road.

He had often been out there before — too often in his opinion — called out with his firefighters and other emergency workers to help guide snarled traffic past a tangle of accidents.

This time, at least 15 cars were in the ditch. And when the wind kicked up, it pushed him across the highway.

He said it seems like every time it rains or snows, the curving, sloping 1 $\frac{2}{3}$ -mile area between Midway Road and Boundary Avenue on Interstate 35

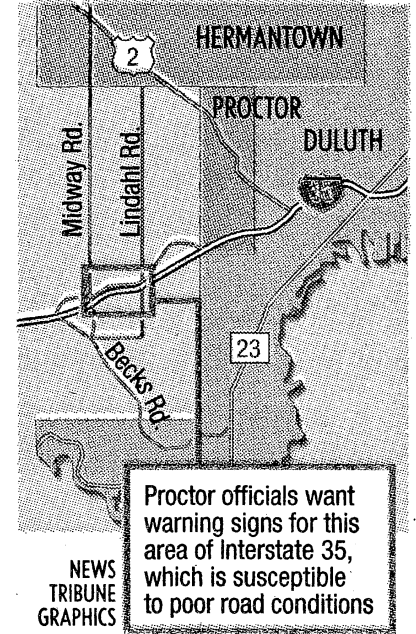
turns into the slickest, most dangerous stretch of highway around.

That's why Ward and the city of Proctor have asked the Minnesota Department of Transportation to build two electronic warning signs. One would be placed above the southbound lane, north of the exit for Midway Road; the other would be above the northbound lane, south of the exit.

The remote-controlled "changeable" signs would warn drivers about accidents, fog, snow and other poor driving conditions.

"With that curve there, I think a lot of people are driving into bad situations and not realizing there is something going on just ahead," Ward said.

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"I believe (a sign) would be real helpful. When you start getting serious injuries, I think it's well warranted."

Rob Ege, MnDOT's district traffic engineer, said in the coming weeks he will study the area's crash history over the past three years and look for contributing factors, such as road condition, weather and type of accident.

Based on those results, Ege will decide, with other MnDOT officials, what step to take.

"We take this very seriously," Ege said. "We are committed to look into this, and there will be a sign of some kind. It may not be electronic, though." It could be a standard warning sign, like "slippery when wet."

Northeastern Minnesota has eight electronic signs in operation; each costs up to \$10,000, Ege said.

Capt. Clarence Nyland of the Minnesota State Patrol in

Duluth said anything less than the attention-grabbing changeable signs won't have much of an effect on drivers.

"I'm not really convinced there's anything MnDOT can do about it," Nyland said.

Since the beginning of 2002, the Proctor Fire Department has responded to 12 serious accidents in the area, Ward said.

The section of I-35 in question actually is in Midway Township. Proctor's 21-member volunteer fire department contracts to serve the township along with the State Patrol, Midway First Responders and St. Louis County Sheriff's Department.

The only fatal accident happened several years ago and had nothing to do with the weather, Ward said. But the area sees its share of close calls. In November 2000, a Twin Cities resident's car spun out on the Midway Road overpass. As the 21-year-old man surveyed the damage, another car hurtled out of control toward him. He jumped off the bridge as a

last resort and survived the leap, but he spent a month in a coma.

"There's just been so many accidents that — every time an ice or snowstorm happens — we can just count on getting called there," Ward said.

Nyland said it's definitely a problem area. He said one or two squad cars have been rammed by out-of-control cars while working accident scenes.

The whole I-35 stretch roughly north of Midway Road can be notoriously foggy when, just a few miles south, skies are clear.

Ed Shimon, a National Weather Service meteorologist in Duluth, said the area is a high-elevation point, where low clouds that form over Lake Superior turn into fog.

"In the winter in those places, it turns into freezing fog or black ice," said Shimon, who said the specific area has never been formally studied by the weather service.

But conditions are so rou-

tinely bad that a few miles up the road, off I-35's northbound lane, University of Minnesota Duluth and MnDOT engineers have an ongoing study. Their highway-side laboratory uses a video system to monitor atmospheric visibility. The system eventually could help safety officials automatically post warnings on signs like the one Proctor is lobbying for. The signs now are controlled from MnDOT's traffic-management center in Duluth.

MnDOT relies on maintenance crews and emergency workers to relay information, Ege said.

Proctor's City Council also endorsed Ward's request last month, said John Foschi, Proctor city administrator. But councilors have not pledged to devote any money toward the sign.

In recent years, the information signs have grown more common around the region, including one a few miles north, just before Duluth's Cody Street exit.