

Occupant dies after wreck on former Highway 395 safety corridor

Traffic volume down north of Hermiston, but number of crashes remains steady

By SEAN HART
Staff Writer

A stretch of Highway 395 that was once a designated safety corridor claimed another life last week. And another person remains in serious condition after an Oct. 19 collision north of Hermiston.

Jacelyn Loyce Black, 36, Hermiston, died Oct. 25 in Richland. She was the passenger in a 2003 Honda Civic driven by Jami Lynne Masters, 52, Boardman, who remains in serious condition after being flown by air ambulance to Kadlec Regional Medical Center in Richland. Masters was a caregiver with the Eastern Oregon Support Services Brokerage who provided support to Black, who had Down syndrome.

While traveling south on Highway 395, their vehicle collided with a 2010 Toyota Scion driven by Elizabeth Cervantes, 22, Hermiston, who attempted to turn left onto Baggett Lane, Oregon State Police Sgt. Seth Cooney said. Cervantes was also taken to a hospital by ambulance.

Almost exactly one week later — at 5:30 p.m. Oct. 26 — it happened again. Sonia Mota-Sotelo was traveling south on the highway in a 2004 Ford Focus when Ashley Brooks, 27, La Grande, attempted to turn her 2001 Ford Focus onto Baggett Lane from the northbound turning lane, and the vehicles collided, Cooney said. Fortunately, Mota-Sotelo and Brooks were the only vehicle occupants, and neither was taken to a hospital. Cooney said Brooks was cited for driving while her license was suspended. But Jerrad Little, the OSP trooper investigating both wrecks, said he did not believe impairment or speed contributed to either of the collisions.

Cooney said this is not the first and second times concerns have been voiced about the highway north of Hermiston.

“For as many businesses that are in there with a 55 mile per hour speed limit, there is a higher potential for crashes because you’ve got a lot more people coming in and out of traffic,” he said. “It used to be a safety corridor, which is based in part on the total number of crashes. During the period

it was a safety corridor, that number of crashes dropped, so it lost its safety corridor designation.”

The roughly four-mile stretch from Hermiston’s northern city limit near Theater Lane to Highway 730 was first designated as a safety corridor in February 1997, according to Oregon Department of Transportation documents. Cooney said the designation was lifted several years ago, but he was not sure exactly when.

ODOT data from 1995-2004 show seven people were killed in crashes on Highway 395 north of Hermiston. From 2005-2014, two people died in the four-mile stretch north of the city and two people died in the eight-mile section to its south.

The average traffic volume actually decreased in the northern section, from 16,000 per day at Joy Lane in 1995 to 14,100 in 2005 and to 13,100 in 2014, even while traffic within the city increased. Despite the volume fluctuations, the total number of crashes for the northern section remained at about 215 for both decades, but crashes on the southern section decreased from 736 to 609.

Tom Strandberg, an ODOT public affairs employee in La Grande, said he believed the median barrier installed between Hermiston and Stanfield decreased the number of wrecks on the southern stretch.

“We had a lot of crashes,” he said. “People were using the middle lane for passing instead of turning.”

There are far more business access points along the highway to the north of Hermiston than to the south, however, and about twice as much traffic. Cooney said these factors make the northern stretch more dangerous.

“This is the world we live in,” he said. “The more drivers we have on the road, the more opportunity we have for crashes.”

Cooney said he was not sure whether OSP has been responding to more wrecks lately, but Hermiston Fire & Emergency Services Chief Scott Stanton said the department responded to 18 wrecks between Aug. 1 and Oct. 27 last year and 38 in the same period this year.

Although the actions will not prevent all wrecks, Cooney said drivers can and should take precautions to reduce the risk.

“The number one thing is just flat pay attention,” he said. “Watch traffic at a farther distance ahead of yourself, increase following distance and slow down.”

Teen contracts plague after Heppner hunt

By GEORGE PLAVERN
Staff Writer

A Crook County teenager is recovering in intensive care after contracting bubonic plague during a hunting trip last month near Heppner.

Oregon health officials said the girl likely caught the disease from a flea bite sometime during the trip, which started Oct. 16. She reportedly became sick on Oct. 21 and was hospitalized in Bend three days later.

Bubonic plague is an infectious bacterial disease carried by squirrels, chipmunks and other wild rodents.

When an infected animal becomes sick, its fleas can carry the disease to other animals or humans through bites.

Plague is commonly

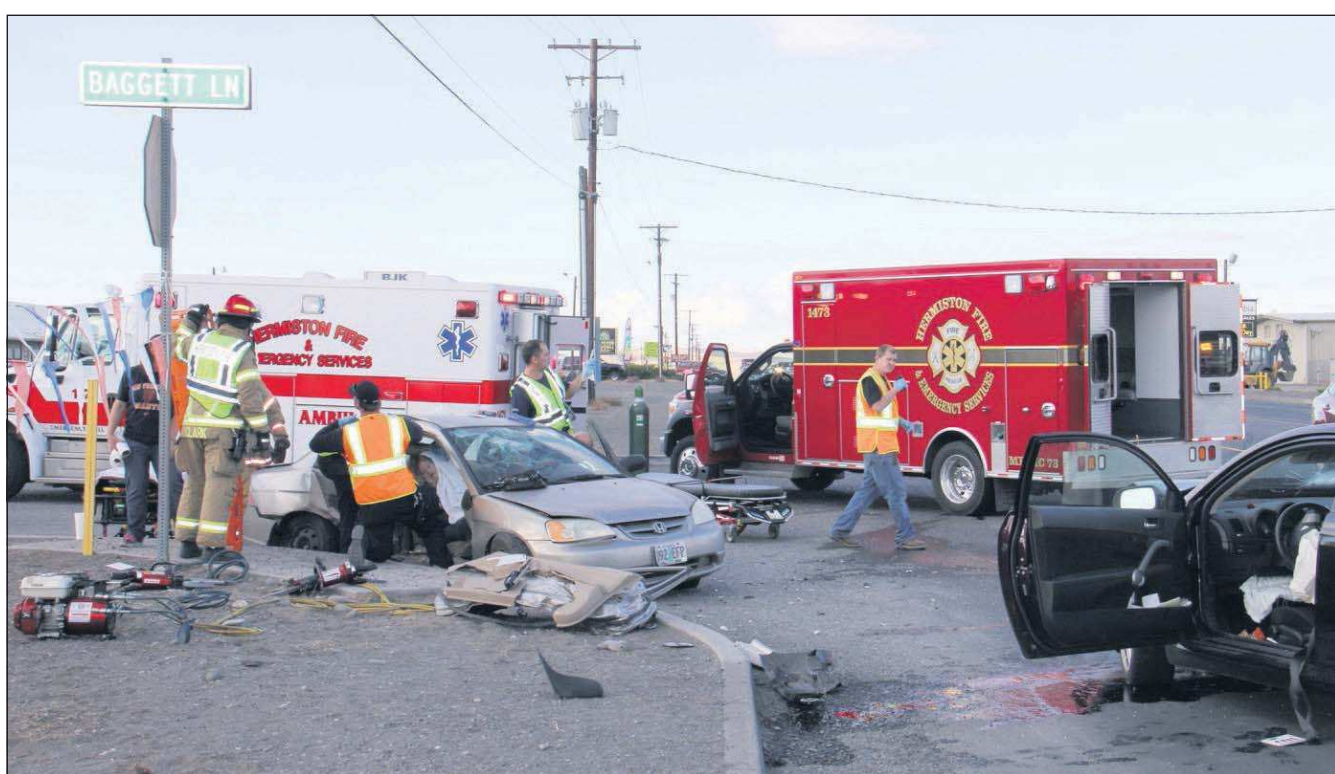
associated with the Black Death, a major pandemic that killed somewhere between 75-200 million people in Europe in the 14th century.

“Many people think of the plague as a disease of the past, but it’s still very much present in our environment, particularly among wildlife,” said Emilio DeBess, Oregon’s state public health veterinarian.

Only eight human cases of plague have been diagnosed in Oregon since 1995, and no deaths have been reported. The disease is treatable with antibiotics if caught early.

DeBess recommends people avoid all contact with wild rodents.

For more information about plague, visit www.cdc.gov/plague.



STAFF PHOTO BY SEAN HART

Hermiston Fire & Emergency Services personnel extricate Jacelyn Loyce Black, 36, Hermiston, from a silver Honda Civic involved in a wreck with a maroon Toyota Scion at the intersection of Highway 395 and Baggett Lane north of Hermiston Oct. 19. Black was transported to a hospital but died Oct. 25. The driver of the Civic, Jami Lynne Masters, 52, Boardman, remains in serious condition at Kadlec Regional Medical Center after being transported there by air ambulance. The driver of the Scion, Elizabeth Cervantes, 22, Hermiston, was transported by ground ambulance to Good Shepherd Medical Center.

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