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Cell Phones: Good For Traffic?



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by: Bill Stamps

Today marked the two year anniversary of Hurricane Ike. Ike was the third costliest hurricane in us history right behind Hurricanes Andrew and Katrina. Since Hurricane Ike and Rita, local officials have been steadily looking for ways improve things when the next one hits. One of those improvements involves a little device some people stick on their ear — the Bluetooth. Bill Stamps has more.

We've all seen them. The man walking through the grocery store seemingly talking to himself. Or the woman in the car next to you who appears to be yelling, yet no one else is in the car. In fact, you might be that person — the person with Bluetooth, the wireless device, attached to your ear that allows you to talk on your cell phone without holding it in your hand. To non-Bluetooth users, those people often look silly, but that little device could come in handy next time there's a need for a major evacuation.

"It's just simple math. When a device crosses point A, we record a time and when it crosses point B, we record a time and we know that distance in-between, and we just do the calculations for speed and travel times on that."

That's David Fink an engineer with TxDot.

Here's how the system works: Harris County places Bluetooth sensors on evacuation routes. If your device is turned on those sensors, will pick up your Bluetooth when you pass by. In the past, the county was able to use sensors that could read your toll tag as you passedby, but with a 75-thousand dollar price tag. They couldn't afford to use many. But Bluetooth sensors are cheap. And so they've begun laying them every ten miles or so on I-45 from Dallas to Conroe — a major evacuation route.

"Information gives you power. So if you know where those slowdowns are, you can see what the problem is there and try to correct it if it can be corrected."

For Bluetooth owners concerned about their privacy, Fink says there's no way for them to ever listen to a conversation and there's no way for them to track your car. Their computers simply pick up a signal as your car passes by the Bluetooth sensor. But the system won't work unless enough people are actually on the phone with the Bluetooth turned on. Fink says he can envision using the system even when there isn't an evacuation.

"Oh, it'll be very useful during non-evacuation times, especially on a holiday weekend. You could see when traffic was slow and things like that and it may help pinpoint accidents along the way and we could help law enforcement and other traffic incident management people out there on those corridors."

During Hurricane Ike many people said they didn't evacuate because they didn't want to go through what they did three years earlier with Hurricane Rita. While transportation officials don't want another major storm to blow our way, they say they're continually working to make life easier next time it does.

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