

I-77 will have 'smart cameras' that use AI to alert first responders to crashes

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CHARLOTTE — Channel 9 got an early look at first-of-its kind technology that's designed to keep drivers and passengers safe on the highway.

Part of Interstate 77 will soon have so-called "smart cameras." They'll be used to help alert crews to any dangers on the drive through the 26 miles of toll lanes between uptown Charlotte and Mooresville.

Traffic Team 9's Mark Taylor visited the Charlotte Traffic Management Center with Channel 9's partners at I-77 Mobility to see how they work.

Heath Holland is the manager of the CTMC.

"Once we pull the incident up on camera and verify it is an actual incident, the operator is trained at that point to dispatch necessary emergency crews," Holland said.

The system is impressive but it can be overwhelming to manage. A new pilot program using artificially intelligent cameras along I-77 could alert crews to danger more quickly.

AI technology isn't totally new, but the new pilot has the first cameras of their kind in North Carolina and the technology is remarkable.

"What we want to look for is the past and present images to be constantly moving," said I-77 Mobility Chief Information Officer Farouk Soliman. "Any changes when something is not moving, the system goes 'that's a problem.' Or it will see something that wasn't there in the previous image and it senses something there that is new."

That's when emergency services are alerted, getting first responders to those hazards faster. That shorter response time could save lives.

But the new cameras aren't cheap; they can cost up to \$8,000 apiece. But who's paying?

"This does not cost motorists anything," Soliman said. "This is part of our budget to maintain the road safe for everyone."

And I-77 Mobility said it will be worth it. Last year, crews responded to more than 2,200 incidents -- 950 of them crashes. The numbers show a decline in the previous three years, but it wants those numbers to reach zero.

“Our goal is to always have the latest in innovation out there to make sure the road is safe for our motorists,” Soliman said.

Mobility Partners hopes to have a significant number of cameras installed along the 26-mile corridor by the end of the year. The cameras will be installed in stages, starting with sections of I-77 that see higher traffic volumes and accident-prone areas, like on- and offramps.