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SARAH GOODYEAR MARCH 13, 2014

A few thousand dollars worth of steel bollards might have prevented last night's mayhem.

The scene on Red River Street in Austin just after midnight this morning was chaotic and terrifying. A driver apparently trying to evade a drunk-driving checkpoint drove through a temporary barricade onto a street that had been blocked off for the South by Southwest festival. He plowed through a crowd of people out enjoying the night, on their way to and from the numerous bars and music venues in the area.

Two people riding a scooter were killed. Twenty-three others on foot were injured, five of them critically. The driver will face capital murder charges.

For Rob Reiter, an expert in perimeter security and retail and pedestrian safety who advocates for protecting pedestrians with steel barriers such as bollards, the scene was frustratingly familiar. Reiter has been in the high-security barrier business since 1999. He closely followed the 2003 case of an 83-year-old man who lost control of his vehicle and drove at high speed through a farmers' market in Santa Monica, California, killing 10 people and injuring at least 63 others.

"Nobody wants to realize you're just a drunk away from having two dead people and 20 injured."

"I've seen a lot of these and I'm getting sick of them," says Reiter.

After the Santa Monica crash, the National Transportation Safety Board issued a report saying that rigid barriers, such as stainless-steel bollards, "might have arrested or reduced the forward motion of the accident vehicle, thereby preventing it from continuing into the farmers' market and eliminating or greatly reducing the number of casualties." But the report was not a binding recommendation. Santa Monica itself has since installed bollards at many locations. But around the country, it's still up to local jurisdictions to implement safety measures in the case of street closures.

The gaps in protection again became clear in the summer of 2013, when a man allegedly deliberately drove his car onto the pedestrian boardwalk in Venice, California, killing a woman on her honeymoon and injuring 11 other people. Reiter has served as an expert witness in that case, pointing out that while some areas of the Venice boardwalk were protected by steel bollards, there was still an opening left for the driver to exploit.

Those are just the highest-profile instances of cars ending up in areas where pedestrians think they are perfectly safe, says Reiter, who is also the co-founder of the Storefront Safety Council. At StoreFrontCrashExpert.com, he blogs with grim regularity about the frequent crashes into storefronts and other places where people on foot have every reason to think they won't get hit.

He says that in the Austin case, removable steel bollards would have provided a secure environment for SXSW partiers. The cost to the city, he says, would have been negligible compared to the human and financial toll that the early-morning crash will exact. The bollards cost about \$400 apiece. With eight of them, you can block one typical street entrance. They can be used over and over again, and take only about 20 minutes to install and 10 minutes to remove. Different bollard designs—removable, retractable, or hinged—have different accommodations to allow emergency access to the affected streets.

For a city like Austin, which hosts SXSW and other festivals on a regular basis, Reiter says that investing in steel barriers should be an easy call to make. There are just too many cases, he says, in which a 4,000-pound vehicle piloted by an out-of-control driver ends up in the wrong place, destroying lives in moments.

“It’s the same story over and over,” he says. “And nobody wants to realize you’re just a drunk away from having two dead people and 20 injured and being on the national news.”

A few thousand dollars spent on bollards, Reiter says, could have assisted Austin police in doing the job they were trying to do – protecting the people enjoying their city's streets. He says he just doesn’t understand why, despite all the lives that have been lost, cities continue to do things the same old way.

“At the end of the day,” says Reiter, “doing nothing is just crazy.”

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