



## THINGS THAT WORK

### Here's one idea to make 'Storrowing' a thing of the past



LASERVISION

**If a vehicle that's too tall to fit in the Sydney Harbour Tunnel gets too close to its entrance, a holographic-like image of a giant stop sign is projected onto a curtain of water.**

By [Matt Rocheleau](#)

GLOBE STAFF FEBRUARY 08, 2018

*Editor's note: This is part of a series exploring initiatives around Boston, the country, and the world that have succeeded or hold great promise, from government to business to culture. For more stories, [click here](#).*

From [clanging cowbells](#) to [flashing lights](#) and [lots of signage](#), no measure — no matter how creative — has prevented truck drivers from crashing into low-clearance bridges and tunnel entrances across Massachusetts on a regular basis, wedging their vehicles underneath.

In Boston, the accidents are so well-documented on roads like Storrow Drive that one local beer company last week [released](#) a new beer that is a tribute to the phenomenon: "Storrowed."

But on the other side of the world, officials have deployed an in-your-face warning system that seems impossible for even the most inattentive drivers to ignore.

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When sensors in Australia gauge that an approaching vehicle is too tall to fit inside the Sydney Harbour Tunnel, operators press a button triggering a thin sheet of water that pours from the ceiling of the tunnel entrance, while a holographic image of a massive, red stop sign is projected onto the waterfall.

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Yes, you read that right. A waterfall. Because to be visible, the image must be projected onto a surface in the middle of the road, prompting drivers to hit the brakes. And, unlike a physical barrier, the water is harmless to vehicles if they roll through it and still allows for emergency vehicles to get into the tunnel if needed.

The idea, called the [Softstop Barrier System](#), hasn't just prevented potential injuries and deaths. It has also eliminated the major traffic jams caused when a too tall vehicle crashes into or gets stuck inside the tunnel, proponents say. When the system stops trucks short of the tunnel entrance, it still causes some delays as those vehicles are removed from the roadway, but those are far less lengthy and problematic than crashes.

"We've welcomed it," said Peter Khoury, head of media for the National Roads and Motorists'

Association, an advocacy organization that represents about 2.6 million drivers in Australia. "Any technology that can be used to prevent this sort of thing from happening we support."

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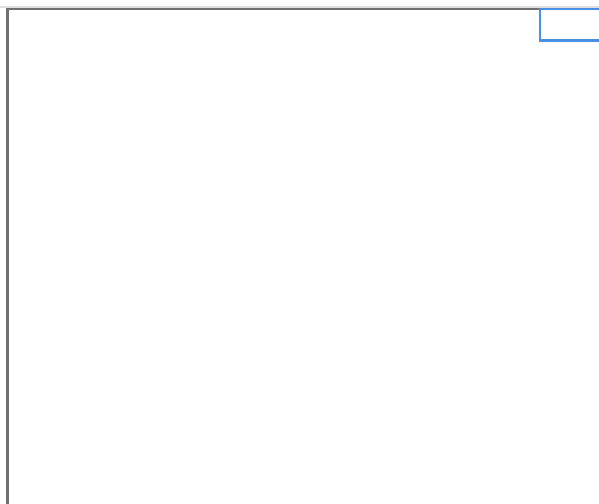
Avoiding such crashes also means cutting down on the expense and traffic snarls that result when repairs must be made after an accident.

The system was [installed](#) in January 2007 at an entrance to the busy tunnel. Before it was in place, drivers of too large vehicles regularly ignored more traditional signage and warnings, officials said. Over the first two years the system was in place, it was activated 34 times, said Bob Allen, general manager of the private company contracted to build and manage the Sydney program. In 26 of those cases, or about 76 percent of the time, the system worked, prompting overheight trucks to stop before impact.

In the other eight cases, all of which occurred during the system's inaugural year, drivers didn't stop in time, rolling through the floating image; only one of those cases resulted in any damage, Allen said.

Matthew Tuey, marketing and creative concepts manager for Laservision, the company that developed the system, said in the years since, Softstop has continued to be successful and is activated "on at least a monthly basis."

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So could it work here, in a city where truck crashes are so frequent that at least [two](#) were [logged](#) in the past two weeks alone?

A pair of local transportation experts were cautiously optimistic that it could, but said the feasibility is dependent on several variables, such as the location.

"This sounds like a promising idea," Alan Altshuler, an emeritus urban policy and planning professor at

Harvard University who was Massachusetts' transportation secretary from 1971 to 1975, said in an e-mail.

Officials at the state agencies that control roadways around the city and state and respond to accidents declined to say what they thought of the Sydney system or elaborate on whether they would consider taking a look at it.

But Eric Bourassa, who's worked on transportation-related issues for 15 years, including the past nine as transportation director at the Boston-based Metropolitan Area Planning Council, said he has never seen anything like the Sydney system.

"Wow, that's really cool," he said by phone as he saw images of it for the first time. "It's worth checking out and evaluating anything that can stop these vehicles from crashing into the bridges on Storrow Drive."

Overheight crashes are [particularly common](#) in the Boston area during late August and early September, as college students move in and apartment leases turn over, leading to streets full of moving trucks. Many of those vehicles are simply too tall to fit under overpasses along roads including Storrow and Memorial drives and Soldiers Field Road, and their drivers can be unfamiliar with either a rental vehicle, the roads, or both.

But the problem persists year round, and even among motorists [more experienced](#) with steering tall vehicles through narrow streets.

In [February 2013](#), 34 people were injured when a bus carrying Pennsylvania high school students who had been touring Harvard University crashed as it attempted to drive under a Soldiers Field Road overpass.

The crashes have continued even as crews have [hung more signs](#) and taken other measures to try to warn drivers. (Fines for so-called Storrowing can range from \$100 to \$300, depending on the circumstances, State Police spokesman David Procopio said.)

It's not just a city problem, either. Over the past two years, the MBTA said it recorded 46 cases — or nearly two per month, on average — in which an overheight vehicle struck a commuter-rail bridge, delaying passenger service, including [an incident last month in Dedham](#).

One potential hurdle to bringing the Australian technology here: The system in Sydney wasn't cheap. It cost roughly \$325,000.

That could add up significantly if a system were installed at each entrance or low-hanging overpass along some roadways.

For example, there are numerous on-ramps and more than a dozen low-clearance spots in each direction of the Storrow Drive-Soldiers Field Road corridor.

But, Laservision said a portion of the Sydney system cost was attributed to having to develop the technology and create the system for the first time. The company said the cost of future systems should

be lower, somewhere between \$200,000 and \$300,000.

And for the system to work here, modifications might be needed.

One obstacle could involve the dependence on water. In Sydney, weather records dating back to 1859 show the temperature has never fallen below freezing. So how would those waterfalls fare on cold winter days in Massachusetts? Laservision officials said not to worry: A heating component could be added to the system to counter subfreezing temperatures.

Another potential sticking point could be that the system in Sydney is manually operated by control-room monitors. But company officials say it would be fairly straightforward to set up the technology to automatically activate if a large vehicle tripped sensors along the roadway.

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