

Photos By JEFF SINER/Staff

Traffic makes its way down I-77 north, lit only by headlights because of thieves.

Crime Takes A Light Out Of Charlotte

Theft Of Copper Wire Is Leaving Interstate Drivers In The Dark

By KEVIN O'BRIEN
Staff Writer

No, your eyes aren't going bad. At night, Charlotte's interstate highways are the darkest in North Carolina. The reason is highway robbery.

Since early 1988, thieves, often working during the day, have stolen \$120,000 worth of underground copper wires that link and power overhead lights.

And despite late-night surveillance, invisible dyes and sleuth work by the State Bureau of Investigation, the culprits have never been caught.

They've knocked out 500 mercury- and sodium-vapor lights across Mecklenburg in search of copper, which brings as much as 80 cents a pound as scrap.

And they've severed live, 480-volt wires, to do it.

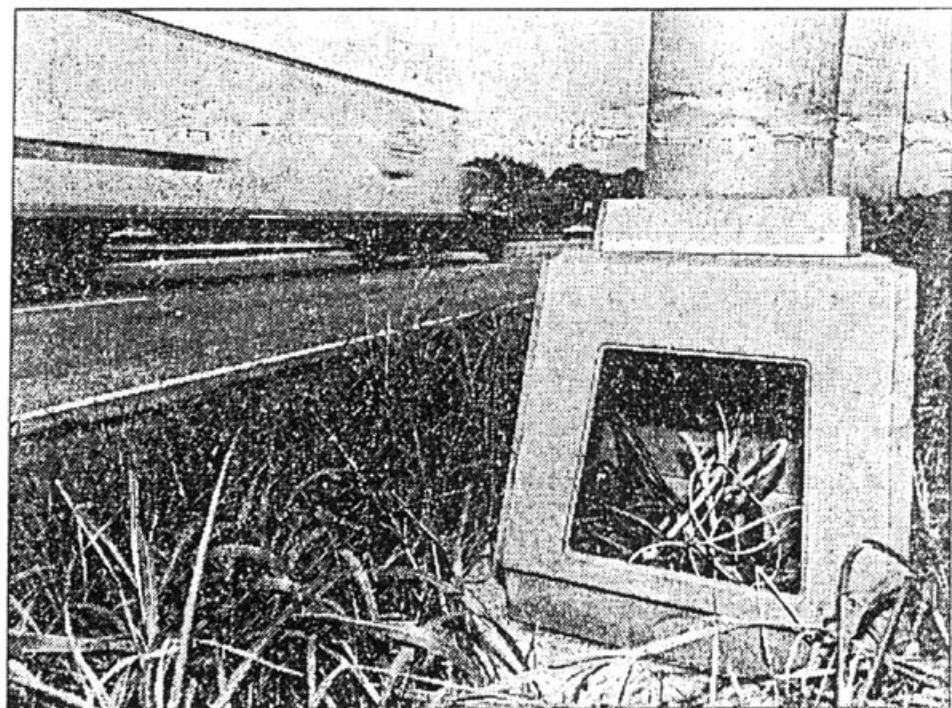
And when law enforcement agents alerted local scrap dealers, the thieves apparently fled for safer, untapped metallic forests up north.

But their damage remains.

Today, at least 300 lights along I-77, I-85 and the John Belk and Brookshire freeways still don't work. They will take months to repair.

Meanwhile, between dusk and dawn, the sporadic lighting increases the danger of driving on Charlotte's heavily traveled interstates.

Nighttime motorists must make sudden turns or complex lane changes without overhead illumination. The danger increases with rain, which obscures pavement markings, such as lane lines.



Thieves have opened the aluminum plates at the base of adjoining light poles, snipped the copper wires that connected them and pulled out the cable.

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Crime Leaves Drivers In The Dark

Copper Wire Is Hot Item Among Interstate Thieves In Charlotte

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"When we light a road, it's usually for safety," said Jimmy Lynch, the state Transportation Department's traffic engineer. "We're not lighting for aesthetic reasons."

State employees say the thefts are a big-city problem — Charlotte is the only place hit hard in the Carolinas. They began noticing the problem in early 1988 along the LaSalle Street and Brookshire Freeway intersections with I-77.

Thieves using crescent wrenches had opened the aluminum plates at the base of adjoining light poles, snipped the 250-foot copper wires that connected them, and pulled out the cable like it was spaghetti.

The crime was repeated up and down the interstates.

Signs of the thefts can still be seen at the bottoms of many light poles, where a tangle of wires often protrudes from gaping holes in the aluminum.

Many solutions were tried.

Workers left lights on during the day, hoping the threat of electrocution would make thieves think twice about touching hot wires. It didn't.

The SBI was called in. Agents sprayed an invisible dye on some poles that would mark culprits with a stain that glowed yellow under ultraviolet light.

Transportation Department employees hid along interstates, waiting to catch the thieves, yellow-handed. They never did.

"I don't remember anybody being indicted," said Jim Woodard, SBI district supervisor in Charlotte.

Untangling the mess will be slow. That's because the Transportation Department, which maintains lights along federal interstates, has only two people — one of them working part-time — on the time-consuming task.

Without more help, a supervisor predicted: "We'll never catch up."

"We'll never get to the point that we'll have zero outage," said Ken Barnes, a maintenance engineer in the Albemarle district office. "We're lucky to keep our heads above water at this point."

Sharon Pitchford knows about treading water. She's the lone state traffic control technician assigned full-time to rewire Mecklenburg's lights. Asked last week when she thinks she'll complete the job, she said, "Don't ask."

"There are just so many of those lights out," Pitchford said. "It's just a never-ending story."

Help is on the way.

Don Goins, the transportation department's top administrator for Charlotte, said he's asked Raleigh headquarters for reinforcements. He expects to receive approval for them soon.

"The goal is to have all the lights working by the spring," he said.

N.C. Hopes To Turn Out Lights On Copper Thefts

By DAVID PERLMUTT
Staff Writer

For the past year, state-owned streetlights on Charlotte's interstates have gone dark from vandals pilfering their copper wiring.

It's an expensive nuisance, costing taxpayers nearly \$100,000 in a small section of Charlotte alone.

But now a warning from the state:

Yank up our wires and they may be too hot for even thieves to handle.

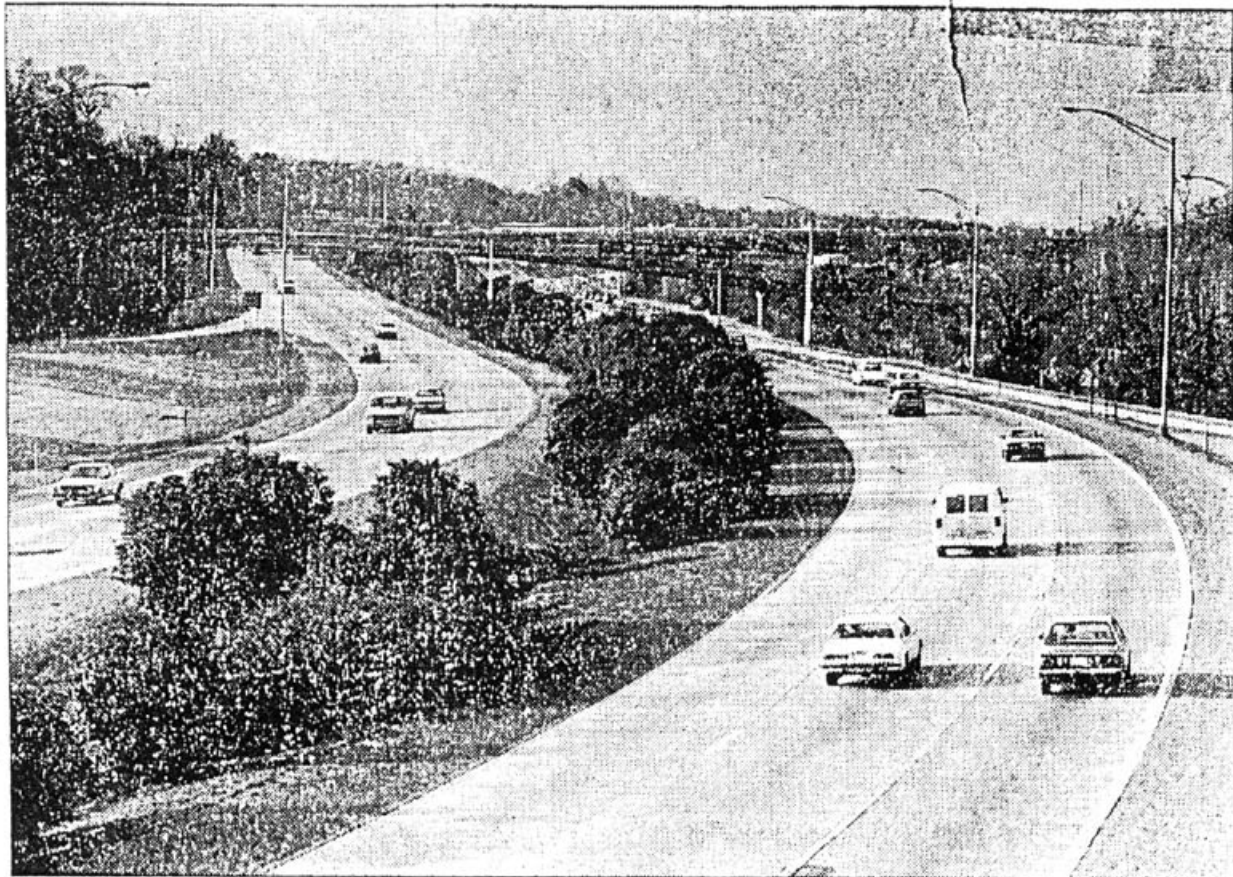
To combat the thefts, the N.C. Department of Transportation (DOT) has begun an experiment on I-77, ordering streetlights at the LaSalle Street interchange to be left on during the day.

In those wires flows 480 volts.

"It seemed when the lights were off, they'd go in, cut the wires and pull them up," said Ken Barnes, a DOT traffic service supervisor. "With the lights on, that's a lot of voltage they have to contend with. Somebody's going to think twice before they grab those wires."

The experiment seems to be working, Barnes said. For the six weeks since the lights have remained on, no pilfering has been reported in the area.

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MICHELLE AGINS/Staff

The N.C. Transportation Department is leaving streetlights — like these along I-77 at LaSalle

Street — on during the day in an effort to ward off vandals.

N.C. Hopes Experiment Turns Out Lights On Copper Thefts

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Along sections of I-85, I-77 and Brookshire Freeway north of uptown, the DOT has had to replace between 40,000 and 50,000 feet of copper wire during the past 13 months — costing about \$100,000, Barnes said.

The DOT and police don't know when the thieves strike, but they know how they work.

Barnes said they cut wires at the base of light poles and pull up the wiring running 250 feet between poles. Most of it is buried in conduit 4-feet deep.

Some copper thieves have been seen working during afternoon rush hours when traffic is

backed up for miles, Barnes said.

"They seem to know when we're off work and where they can go so they won't be caught," he said.

Rubber insulation, he said, has been found piled up underneath bridges. The wires were strung between pillars and stripped to expose the copper.

Thefts generally rise with the price of copper, which currently brings about 50 cents a pound for top grade.

Stolen copper likely is sold to out-of-town scrap metal processors, Barnes said.

A mile of copper wire can bring about \$2,000 at a scrap yard, said Dean Maxwell,

scrap purchaser for Republic Alloys Inc. in Charlotte.

Maxwell said Charlotte and Mecklenburg County police have alerted him and other processors to the pilfering. State Bureau of Investigation officials say they also are investigating the wire thefts.

"Scrap processors around here wouldn't buy that kind of wire," said Robert Helbein, president of Southern Metals Co. Inc. "They'd know it didn't come from the proper place, that it was not a legitimate sale."

Helbein and Maxwell say they've never been approached.