

Dear Road Wizard: I have noticed what appears to be spotlights on the crossarms at some intersections, i.e. Five Mile Road at Franklin Road and Maple Grove Road at Franklin. What is their purpose? W.F., Boise

Those are "call-back lights." They are part of the Opticom system used by our emergency services -- fire, police, ambulance -- to preempt the traffic signal at the intersection, turn a red light green, and keep it green until the vehicle has passed through the intersection.

The real meat of the Opticom system is the little receiver next to the call-back light. The ambulance driver aims a strobe at it, and the gadget starts working its will in the controller box. The call-back light is an optional part of the system. It lights up as if to tell the ambulance driver "Order received and implemented. This green is for you. Carry on and Godspeed."

Not all of the emergency services consider the call-back light to be essential to operations. However, the Meridian Fire Department prefers to have them, so when you see this feature, you can figure you're in Meridian Fire Department territory.

And, Dear Wizard, what are those bell-shaped objects on light poles at those and many other intersections? A.@"

A few weeks ago, The Crowbar Incident went down. I warmed up my Fabulous Crystal Cone and tuned it to "Replay, non-Super Bowl." Crystal used a male voice to tell the story:

For Joe Friday, at the ACHD traffic control console, and Officer Frank Smith, cruising the streets of The City, the day began like any other day. Then, life in the eastbound lane of I-84 near the Broadway Avenue exit got complicated.

Friday is at his post, watching traffic on video display screens. The police dispatch scanner crackles in the background. A doughnut sits at the edge of the console. Chocolate. From the scanner, Friday hears the phrase "crowbar in the road." Time: 4:10 pm.

Dispatch sends Officer Smith to the eastbound lanes. Friday switches his monitor to display the view from ACHD's camera high above the Broadway/I-84 Overpass. Using remote controls to move the lens, he finds the crowbar. Via dispatch, he describes the location for Officer Smith.

While Smith is on the way, a truck drives over the crowbar. Pops it sky-high. Crashes on bare concrete, missing silver Taurus. Lady driver. Friday holds the camera on the crowbar and its trajectory. Updates new location for Smith.

Smith arrives. While he pulls into shoulder, a second truck drives over crowbar. Friday watches it bounce into the center median. Again, it misses a vehicle. Friday guides Smith to crowbar. He retrieves crowbar. Time: About 4:16 pm. Friday reaches for doughnut. It is good.

End of story, and Old Crystal faded out. Whoever had phoned 911 about the crowbar is the true hero/heroine of the story. Later, the characters involved examined the indestructible crowbar, amazed that it hadn't crashed into someone's window or wrecked an undercarriage.

They reminisced about other Incidents: Deer Carcass Incident, Mattress Incident, Spilled Cargo Incident. But the most frequent and most typical obstructions to free-flowing traffic are Stalled Vehicle Incident and Crashed Vehicle Incident. These happen every day.

So the white bell-shaped things are remotely operated real-time cameras,

usually mounted high on a light pole with a triangular pipe brace. A transparent bowl at the bottom protects the lens. Their purpose is to facilitate a coordinated (police, dispatch, media, ACHD) and intelligent response to an Incident that delays or endangers those of us who haven't lost track of our crowbars.