

Responder helps bust theft case

By Bob Kudelka

SCDOT incident responders in the SHEP program travel our highways, making traffic smoother by helping disabled vehicles, setting up traffic management in major incidents and sometimes even helping solve crimes.

Call it CSI: SCDOT.

In this case, SHEP driver **Matthew Perry** of TE-HQ/SHEP helped crack a case of vandalism and thievery involving state-owned variable message signs along interstate highways in the Midlands.

Perry's supervisor, **James Zarpentine**, is not surprised that Perry went the extra mile to help nab the perpetrator.

"We're proud of Matthew," said Zarpentine, Columbia SHEP supervisor, said. "We're proud of him for what he did and we're proud of the job he does every day."

In January, SCDOT began to get reports of wires cut and batteries and tires stolen from variable message signs, said **John Wood**, Columbia SHEP Program Supervisor who works out of the Traffic Management Center on Shop Road.

The batteries alone cost \$1,500 to replace, Wood said. In one stretch of five



ROB THOMPSON/THE CONNECTOR

Incident Responder Matthew Perry was an extra set of eyes on the highway that helped catch a thief who was stealing batteries from variable message signs.

days, three signs were found vandalized and batteries stolen.

Wood and other SCDOT officials alerted SHEP responders to be on the lookout for anything suspicious with signs as they made their routine patrols.

Among the SHEP responders notified was Perry, who said being a member of SCDOT's SHEP is a dream job.

He was 14 years old when he came across

a horrible tractor trailer accident in North Carolina. He vividly remembers passing by as authorities helped at the scene. He's wanted to be part of SHEP ever since.

"I enjoy helping people," said Perry.

On the morning of Jan. 27, Perry was patrolling in Lexington County on I-77 northbound near mile marker 2 when he saw a man and a vehicle at the side of the highway.

Perry stopped his truck, figuring the man needed help changing a tire. Instead, the man approached Perry and told him he was just checking the batteries of the portable message sign.

"He had a vest on, but he wasn't in a truck with a strobe light," Perry said.

Perry noticed the battery box on the sign was open as the man started to drive away. Perry wrote down his license tag and helped make sure the man merged safely back into traffic. He called in the information to the TMC dispatcher and then went back to check the sign.

It had been broken into; one battery was gone. "He must have been trying to take the next battery out" when Perry had first pulled over, he said.

Perry gave police a description of the man and the vehicle.

The next day, a man was arrested stealing a battery out of a car on I-77. Perry picked the man out of a police lineup, linking him to the theft and vandalism of the state sign battery.

After the arrest, officials said the incidents of sign vandalism and thefts along the interstates stopped.

"He handled it well," Zarpentine said of Perry. "SHEP operators are out there by themselves."

Perry, of Gilbert, joined SCDOT seven years ago and has been with SHEP for more than a year. It's a job he wouldn't trade.

"Anything I do I try to give it 110 percent," he said. "My favorite thing is watching the people leave after they get helped."

Hurricane season starts early

By Bob Kudelka

Hurricane Season was still three weeks away when SCDOT employees readied for a storm aimed at the SC coast.

It was no drill, despite the calendar showing May 9. The Atlantic Hurricane Season runs from June 1 to Nov. 30

"This is the earliest that I can recall having to prepare for a storm," said State Maintenance Engineer **David Cook**, a 23-year veteran of SCDOT.

The threat of subtropical storm Ana put employees into action, from crews in Districts 5 and 6, led by DEAs **Kyle Berry** and **Robert Clark**, to Headquarters and the Traffic Management Center, Cook said.

Horry and Georgetown counties brought in one crew each early Saturday morning in case roads needed to be cleared. Those crews worked a 12-hour shift. They were relieved on Saturday evening by a second crew in each county, also working a 12-hour shift.

In addition, traffic signal crews were on stand-by to repair any signals taken down by high winds. Charleston and Berkeley counties each had two crews on-call. The state Traffic Management Center (TMC) monitored conditions around the clock. The TMCs in Districts 5 and 6 were open for extended weekend hours.

Crews and bridge inspectors were assigned to the three swing bridges in Little River, Socastee and the Ben Sawyer Bridge in Charleston. Crews were prepared to lock down those bridges to maritime traffic once sustained winds reached 25 mph. Only the Little River Bridge was closed from Saturday evening to midday Sunday due to high winds. All three bridges remained open to vehicular traffic.

Fortunately, Ana weakened and no structural damage was reported on the coast.

Cook said it turned out to be a meaningful warmup for what the agency could face later in the season.

"It was good for us to go through all the preparations to make sure everyone

was very familiar with their responsibilities," Cook said. "That's the time of the year we are going through lane reversal practice, updating plans and contact information. It was a good shot across the bow for us."

On June 10, SCDOT employees again were focused on hurricanes – but this time it was the annual lane reversal and evacuation exercise.

The evacuation drill activities were coordinated from the SC Department of Public Safety Headquarters at Blythewood at the Highway Patrol's Operations and Control Cell (OCC) for Emergency Traffic Operations.

State Traffic Management Engineer **Dick Jenkins** worked there alongside representatives from the Highway Patrol Command Staff, SLED, Department of Natural Resources, Probation Pardon and Parole Services and the Civil Air Patrol.

Jenkins coordinated SCDOT's actions at the OCC and communicated with SCDOT Headquarters Command Staff in room 311 by 800 mhz radio and telephone. The Headquarters staff communicated with the Districts to coordinate

placing of traffic control devices for each reversal roadway.

The lane reversals that made up the exercise were U.S. 501 in Horry County; I-26 from Charleston to Columbia; U.S. 21 from Beaufort; and U.S. 278 from Hilton Head.

Hundreds of employees from Districts 1, 5, 6 and 7 participated in the drill.

Director of Traffic Engineering **Tony Fallaw** joined Jenkins at the OCC. **Berry Mattox** was in Conway at the Horry County Emergency Operations Center. Headquarters staff included **Brian Keys**, **Kenny Eargle**, **Leland Colvin**, **Laura Masem**, **Kevin Sheppard**, **Jason Stillwell** and **Brad Latham**.

The SC Emergency Management Division in Pine Ridge was fully staffed for this event with **Tom Johnson** leading Emergency Support Function One-Transportation.

"I am quite proud of our entire team as a quick evaluation by Highway Patrol after the exercise revealed very good coordination between our crews and the Patrol," Jenkins said. "Continued planning and exercising is the key."