

## What a Traffic Engineer Will Tell You about Signs

City Hall receives numerous requests for new traffic signage every year. The City encourages these inquiries because they identify potential problems that may need investigation. The process helps the City become a safer place. The purpose of this article is to provide information to residents that may help them decide if a sign should be requested.

The City takes traffic signage very seriously. The proper use of signs makes roadways safer. Improper use of signs can *reduce* safety – even more so than placing no sign at all. All sign requests are reviewed by a Professional Traffic Operations Engineer associated with the City Engineer’s office. Requested signs are reviewed with engineering judgment and for conformance with a document entitled, Minnesota Manual of Uniform Traffic Control Devices. The manual is viewable on the web at:

<http://www.dot.state.mn.us/trafficeng/otepubl/mutcd>

So, what will a Traffic Engineer tell you about signs?

### Signs in General:

- Overuse of signs leads to a general loss of effectiveness.
- Non-standard Regulatory and Warning signs should be prohibited. The usefulness of such signs is questionable at best and counterproductive (decreasing safety) at worst.

### Stop signs:

- Do not use stop signs for speed control. Studies have shown that unwarranted placement of stop signs leads to noncompliance at the signs as well as speeding problems leading away from the signs.
- The need for the intersection control due to traffic, high speeds, low visibility, crash potential, etc. must be evident to the motorist for a sign to be respected. Controls tend to be ignored when this is not the case. Drivers instinctively think, “Does this sign make sense for what I’m seeing? when reacting to signage. Reflect on your own driving habits in these situations – are you more likely to roll through a stop sign that has no obvious reason for being there? Most people are. Increasing the likelihood of noncompliance means that improperly used stop signs can put a trusting pedestrian or motorist at a higher risk than no sign at all. Creating a false sense of security is a major concern when considering signage.
- Stop signs may not be the safest intersection control for low volume, low speed (30 to 45 mph) locations. Studies at these types of intersections repeatedly show increases in accidents with increasing levels of traffic controls such as 2-way stop signs, all-way stop signs and traffic signals.

## **Children At Play or Slow Children signs:**

Many Traffic Engineers have children. They understand the passionate concern for the safety of kids playing outside in the neighborhood. It is therefore important to understand that the typical denial of these types of signs (and other types) is based on their proven lack of effectiveness - not a lack of empathy. Engineers will say:

- These signs are not approved as an accepted sign nationally or in Minnesota.
- The signs do not provide added protection. National studies have shown that the placement of these signs does not improve safety. No measurable effect on traffic speed or driver behavior has been noted with these signs.
- The signs may initiate unsafe behavior in the street by implying that the street is a playground where motorists are on the lookout for kids. This can obscure the fact that caution in the street is required at all times. The suggestion that the City condones playing in the street should not be made by placing signs.
- Signs placed by residents without approval from the road authority will likely be deemed a hazard and/or liability issue and removed.
- The most important things parents can do for safety is;
  - Supervise small children when playing outside
  - Do not allow play in the streets
  - Teach children to *always* approach roadways safely and to make eye contact with waiting or approaching motorists when crossing a roadway (Try saying when driving with your children, “I’m driving slowly on this street because there are kids playing that might not see our car and could run on to the street.” Your children will usually then think, “I should be careful before running onto the street.”
  - Maintain lines of sight to and from the roadway from and to yards – drivers need to see the children and vice versa
  - Be mindful of their personal driving behaviors – they may be the speeding motorist from another family’s perspective

## **Speed Limit Signs:**

The City’s ability to designate and post speed limits on roadways is limited to local residential streets and urban districts. Urban districts have a strict definition. All locations not meeting this definition where a speed limit change is desired require a speed study to be conducted by the Minnesota Department of Transportation.

Research has shown repeatedly that drivers choose a speed that feels comfortable relative to the roadway features and driving conditions. Speed limit signs do little to influence the average speed, but may help control extremes. The State is careful to authorize speeds that are reasonable – not too fast *or* too slow. Speeds unreasonable to the average motorist contribute to safety issues such as passing, rapid overtaking, or tailgating. A speed study may find speed limits should be increased. This is usually, of course, not the desired outcome. More information on speed limits can be found at:

<http://www.dot.state.mn.us/speed/index.html>

Local police have set up temporary speed monitoring zones in areas reported to be problematic. The issuance of a few citations has been observed to bring high speeds back near conformance for a time. Some other interesting findings have been also noted. The most profound is that the speeders tend to be motorists that live in the same neighborhood. Familiarity seems to lead drivers to be less cautious on their own streets. Officers have also noted that a car travelling 30 mph appears to be moving very fast when observed from a stationary position. Average speeds where motorists are reported to be “speeding” are often found to be quite close to posted limits.

Additional speed limit signs where the City has authority may be recommended by the City Engineer and approved by the City Council if the location is appropriate to remind motorists of the applicable limit without being excessive.

You can fill out a complaint form at City Hall if you believe a sign may be warranted or have remaining concerns about speed after reading this article and researching further online. The City will review the form and refer the issue to engineering and/or law enforcement for further investigation.