

SETTING SPEEDS — THE HOW AND WHY OF OREGON SPEED ZONES

Setting speed zones on Oregon’s highways and streets is often a controversial and emotional issue.

Many citizens believe that lowering the speed will improve traffic safety on their street or in their community. On the other hand, speed zones that are unrealistic are often disregarded by a majority of motorists who are normally careful and law-abiding citizens.

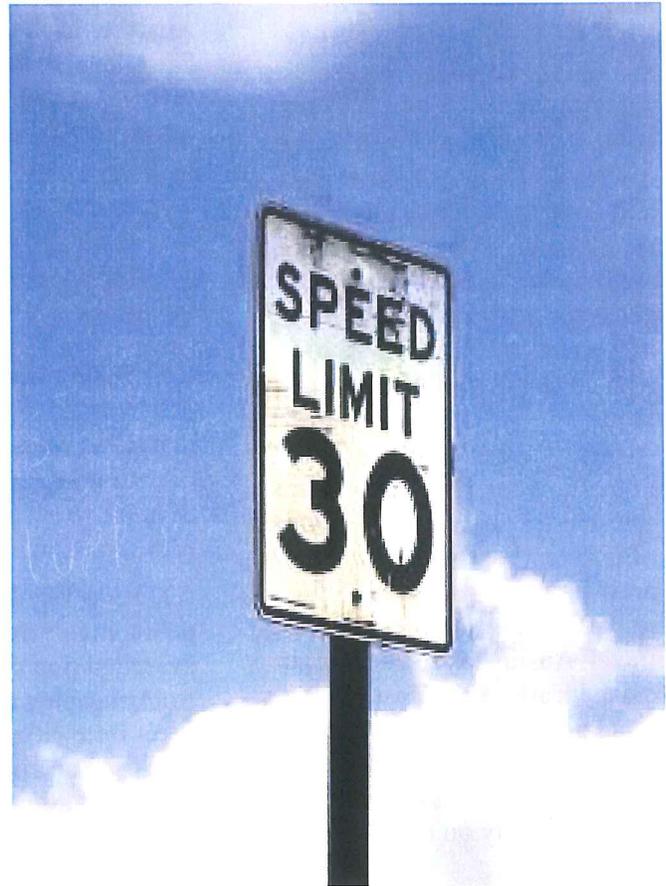
Speed zoning, when used with an overall traffic plan, helps traffic move more safely and efficiently. However, it does not provide a quick fix for land-use problems or poor traffic patterns. Instead, speed zoning reflects a reasonable balance between the needs of drivers, pedestrians, and bicyclists using public roads for travel and for those who live along these roads.

The Logic of Speed Zones

Extensive studies from around the US show that traffic moving at a speed that is reasonable for the road and weather conditions results in fewer accidents. Drivers are more patient, because a reasonable, uniform speed allows progress with less passing, less delay, and fewer rear-end collisions. Lowering the speed does not necessarily result in fewer crashes.

The Basic Rule

Designated and posted speeds are not the final word in Oregon, for all travel on public streets and highways is subject to the **Basic Rule**. The Basic Rule is both a safety valve and an acknowledgement that drivers are able to act independently, reasonably, and with good judgment.



The Rule states that a motorist must drive at a speed that is reasonable and prudent at all times by considering other traffic, road and weather conditions, dangers at intersections, and any other conditions that affect safety and speed.

The Basic Rule does not allow motorists to drive faster than the posted or designated speed. Instead, it expects drivers to be responsible for their own actions.

What Happens When a Speed Zone Change is Requested?

The Oregon Department of Transportation has the responsibility to investigate most public roads at the request of the road authority.

When a city or county asks ODOT to review a speed zone, an engineering study is started. The road is surveyed for the following:



(Continued on page 5)

SETTING SPEEDS

Continued from page 4

- Lane and shoulder widths
- Signals and stop signs
- Number of intersections and other accesses
- Roadside development
- Parking and bicycle lanes

Other analysis includes:

- Number and type of vehicles
- Number of pedestrians and cyclists
- Crash history
- Speed checks

Recognizing that most motorists are generally safe, the speed at or below which 85 percent of the drivers travel is one nationally recognized factor proven by repeated studies as a fair and objective indication of safe and reasonable speeds.

Speed Zoning FAQs

Q: Won't lowering the posted speed reduce speeds?

A: NO. Studies show that there is little change in the driving speeds after a lower speed sign is posted. Drivers are much more influenced by the roadway conditions and their perceptions of the need to slow down. In fact, the lowering of a speed limit, below what is perceived by drivers as a reasonable speed, may result in greater differences in speeds (more variance) with some going faster and some going slower. This means there are more conflicts between vehicles than before the signed speed was lowered.

One study reduced posted speeds by 5, 10 and 15 mph at numerous sites. When speeds were reduced, less than one-half of a percent of the drivers complied with the posted speeds. The average change in speed for all drivers was less than 2 mph and crashes increased by 5 percent.

Q: How do we get vehicles to slow down?

A: The real question is, "How do we improve safety?" Often, we get so focused on the question of reducing posted speeds that we lose sight of the real reason for slowing drivers. How to improve safety

depends on what problem needs to be addressed. Are pedestrians having a hard time finding safe gaps to cross the road? Are vehicles trying to access a highway with high traffic congestion? This is where a local public works department or ODOT can help.



Q: Why do we even have posted speeds?

A: Uniform speeds result in the safest and most efficient operation. The posted speed can keep the traffic flowing smoothly when the majority of drivers find the speeds reasonable. To do this, the speeds must be logical and consistent throughout the state.

If speeds are not reasonable, they can become a source of frustration for drivers when the speeds are enforced, a source of frustration for the local community when the speeds are not adhered to, and a source of frustration for police agencies when they are accused of enforcing the speeds just to produce revenue.

Posted speeds give the motorist an idea of an appropriate speed to drive in unfamiliar locations and are used by enforcement to identify excessive speeds and curb unreasonable behavior.

Q: How are posted speeds determined?

A: The Oregon Revised Statutes sets a default speed for certain streets and roadways. These are referred to as statutory speeds. To set a speed limit not designated in statute, a traffic engineering investigation of the roadway conditions and current speeds must be performed. If that investigation indicates that a lower speed is safe and reasonable, a speed zone order may be issued and a lower speed posted.

Speeds that are posted arbitrarily, without regard to the law, are suspect and could be challenged in court.

Reprinted with permission of Oregon Department of Transportation.