

Speed Limits

Speed limits are often taken for granted and, until a problem arises, most people pay little attention to them. When traffic problems occur, concerned citizens frequently ask why we do not lower the speed limit. There are widely held misconceptions that speed limit signs will slow the speed of motorists, reduce collisions, and increase safety. Most drivers drive at a speed which they consider to be appropriate, regardless of the posted speed limit. "Before and After" studies have shown that there are no significant changes in average vehicle speeds following the posting of new or revised speed limits. **The following information will help you understand how speed limits are established, and what they can and cannot do.**

"Reasonable and Prudent" - Wisconsin law says you must drive within what's called a "reasonable and prudent" limit. That means you not only have to obey the posted speed limit, you must drive a vehicle no faster than is reasonable and prudent under the conditions.

- Weather conditions such as fog, rain, ice or snow as well as heavy traffic or congestion mean you have to reduce your speed to the point where you're able to control the vehicle and avoid colliding with any object, person or vehicle.
- Other conditions requiring you to slow down are: approaching and crossing an intersection or railway grade crossing, when approaching and going around a curve, when approaching a hillcrest, when traveling upon any narrow or winding roadway, when passing school children, highway construction or maintenance workers or other pedestrians.

Statutory Speed Limits - These are the generally established legal speed limits (in miles per hour or MPH) a motorist must obey, and the conditions under which they apply. Limits may differ from these guidelines when indicated by official traffic signs.

- **15 MPH**
 - When passing a school when children are going to or from school or are playing within the sidewalk area near the school.
 - When passing an intersection marked with a "school crossing" sign when children are present.
 - When passing a safety zone occupied by pedestrians and at which a public passenger vehicle has stopped to receive or discharge passengers.
 - On any street or town road, except a state highway or connecting highway, within or near a public park or recreation area when children are going to or from or are playing. This limit applies when the local city or town has enacted an ordinance and posted the limit and where motorists would enter the street from an area where a different speed limit is in effect.
 - In any alley.
- **25 MPH**
 - On any highway within the corporate limits of a city or village, other than on highways in outlying districts.
 - On any service road within the corporate limits of a city or village.
- **35 MPH**
 - In any outlying district within the corporate limits of a city or village.
 - On any highway in a semi-urban district outside the corporate limits of a city or village.
 - On any town road where on either side of the highway within 1,000 feet the buildings in use average less than 150 feet apart. This limit applies when a city or

town board has adopted an ordinance determining such a speed limit and has posted signs.

- **45 MPH**
 - On any highway designated as a rustic road.
- **55 MPH**
 - In the absence of any other fixed limits or the posting of limits as required or authorized by law.
- **65 MPH**
 - On any freeway or expressway, when official signs specifying this limit are posted.

Some of the questions most frequently asked are answered below:

Q: Can local authorities modify statutory speed limits?

A: State law allows limited changes to statutory speed limits if those changes are based on an engineering and traffic investigation.

Q: What is considered in an engineering and traffic investigation?

Traffic engineers and police officers examine many traffic and road conditions to determine a reasonable speed limit. Speed studies are performed to determine the 85th percentile speed, or the speed that 85 out of 100 vehicles travel at or below. This speed is based on the principle that reasonable drivers will consider road conditions when selecting their speed of travel. Other conditions evaluated include number and type of crashes, number of cars, pedestrians, and bicycles, along with physical conditions of the road such as sidewalks, hills, curves, lanes, driveways, intersections, roadway surface, and traffic controls.



Generally speaking, a safe and reasonable limit is set at or below the speed at which 85% of the drivers drive. Posting an appropriate speed limit simplifies the job of enforcement officers, since most of the traffic is voluntarily moving at the posted speed. Blatant speeders are easily spotted, safe drivers are not penalized, and patrol officers aren't expected to enforce unrealistic and arbitrary speed limits.

Q: How can I get a speed limit sign placed on my street to slow traffic?

A: The most common misconception about speed limits is that putting up a sign will slow the speed of traffic, reduce accidents, and increase safety.

The truth is, most drivers drive at a speed that they consider to be comfortable and safe, regardless of the posted speed limit. The City of River Falls does not usually install signs on most residential streets, but instead relies on the Wisconsin Vehicle Code. Studies have shown that there are no significant changes in average vehicle speeds following the posting of new or revised speed limit signs. Furthermore, there is no direct relationship found between posted speed limits and accident frequency.

However, there are ways to slow down drivers on your street:

- Increased Enforcement - This requires an officer to ticket those drivers driving at excessive speeds.
- Speed Monitoring Awareness Radar Tool (Smart Trailer)

The City has a radar device, mounted on a small trailer, to clock vehicles and exhibit their speed on an oversized display board. The device has helped control chronic speeding problems by letting motorists know when they are exceeding the limit. This device is set up by the River Falls Police Department upon request and availability.

Q: Can I get the speed limit lowered on my street to make it safer?

A: No, lower speed limits do not necessarily improve safety. The more uniform the speeds of vehicles in a traffic stream, the less chance there is for conflict and crashes. Posting speed limits lower or higher than what the majority of drivers are traveling produces two distinct groups of drivers - those attempting to observe the limit and those driving at what they feel is reasonable and prudent. These differences in speeds may result in increased crashes due to tailgating, improper passing, reckless driving, and weaving from lane to lane. Inappropriate established speed limits also foster disregard for other speed limits, traffic signs, and contribute to driver frustration.

Also, posting speed limits lower than the 85th percentile speed does not result in voluntary motorist compliance with the posted speed limit unless there is strict, continuous, and visible enforcement. Increased enforcement is effective only at the immediate time and in the area where the police officer is present. The availability of police officers is limited and their services must be shared with other police responsibilities. Since these lower speed limits cannot be properly enforced, they will be consistently violated and will breed disregard for speed limits in general.

Q: Why not install stop signs, traffic signals, speed bumps, or some other device to reduce speeds?

A: Traffic control devices are designed and installed to solve a particular problem. When they are misused for speed control purposes, they are ineffective and may create a hazard. For example:

- Stop signs are designed to control traffic at busy intersections. When used to reduce speed, motorists "roll" through them, then increase their speed between such signs.
- Traffic signals are designed to control large volumes of traffic at very busy intersections or to reduce broadside crashes. When misused, they may cause drivers to speed up to "beat the light" and may increase crashes.
- Speed bumps are hazardous to all vehicles especially emergency vehicles, bicyclists, motorcyclists, school buses, and snow plows.

Q: Why wait until someone is seriously injured or killed before anything is done about speeding?

A: After a serious crash, speeding is often assumed to be the cause. This may not always be true. While crash experience is one of the factors considered in establishing speed limits, it is not the only one--or even the major one. The prevailing 85th percentile speed is the primary factor used to establish a proper speed limit, even if there have been no crashes.

Q: I am only one person among thousands of other drivers. What can I do to reduce the speeding problem in my neighborhood?

A: Speed limits are based upon studies of driving speeds - yours, your neighbors, and a percentage of everyone traveling on a roadway. Please obey the speed limit, not only on your street but on all streets and highways.

Q: Will increasing the speed limit make the road more dangerous?

A: Increasing speed limits does not decrease safety of the roadway. The more uniform the speeds of vehicles in a traffic stream, the less chance there is for conflict or crashes. It is recommended that speed limits be set to within 10 miles per hour of the 85th percentile speed. This information is consistent with recommendations and supporting data provided by the Wisconsin DOT, Minnesota DOT, Michigan DOT and Iowa DOT. Based on various studies by these agencies, it was determined that the majority of motorists did not increase their speed by 5-10 miles per hour when speed limits were raised, nor did they reduce their speed by 5-10 mph when speed limits were lowered.

Concerned citizens may think that increasing the speed limit would then increase the 85th percentile speed, thus needing a higher speed limit, resulting in a never-ending escalation of speeds. Numerous studies have been performed to prove this is not true. Various study results have shown little or no change in the 85th percentile speed, although some show a slight increase in the average speed. The increase of the average speed is due to the group of people who follow the posted limits increasing their speed to match the new limit.

In summary, the driver is responsible for traveling at a safe speed, based on the weather (rain, snow, high winds); visibility; traffic; roadway conditions; and at a speed which does not endanger the safety of persons or property.