

Speed Zoning FAQs

WON'T LOWERING THE POSTED SPEED REDUCE SPEEDS?

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.

WILL LOWERING THE POSTED SPEED REDUCE CRASH FREQUENCY?

NO. Although lowering the speed is often seen as a cure-all in preventing crashes, this is not the case. Especially if it causes more variance in the speeds drivers are traveling, it can result in higher severity and higher frequency of crashes, especially at driveways and intersections. Crashes are more frequently the result of driver inattention and driver error rather than speed, although higher speeds can contribute to the severity of crashes.

HOW DO WE GET VEHICLES TO SLOW DOWN?

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.

A combination of efforts is needed to address safety issues. The roadway may need some physical improvement so that it provides improved sight distance of either pedestrians or other vehicles. Also, the context of the roadway needs to be considered. Does the roadway’s “look and feel” convey to the driver the need to be especially careful and drive slower? Pedestrian islands, to shorten pedestrian exposure, are often effective. A media campaign to educate the public of roadway concerns can bring changes in drivers’ behavior.

Besides road changes, the enforcement of posted speeds is essential. Many drivers will abide by posted speeds only if they know there will be consequences if they drive faster.

WHY DO WE EVEN HAVE POSTED SPEEDS?

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.

WHY IS THE SPEED 65 MPH FOR CARS AND 55 MPH FOR TRUCKS ON THE INTERSTATE?

The reasoning behind the speed differential is that the heavier the vehicle, the greater the stopping distance required. Thus the reduced speed for heavy trucks allows them more cushion to be able to react to changing conditions.

HOW CAN POSTED SPEEDS BE CHANGED?

A request should be made to the proper road authority, the entity responsible for maintenance of the roadway. For state highways it is ODOT, for city streets it is the City and for county roads it is the County.

HOW ARE POSTED SPEEDS DETERMINED?

The Oregon Revised Statutes sets a default speed for certain streets and roadways. These are referred to as statutory speeds. Examples of statutory speeds are 55 mph basic rule on most rural or unposted roadways, 25 mph on residential streets, or 20 mph in business districts. These speeds by default are limited to certain types of road and roadside development defined in the law. To set a speed limit not designated in statute, a traffic engineering investigation of the roadway conditions and current speeds must first 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.

Cities and counties often request ODOT to perform a speed zone investigation on roadways which have significantly changed or developed since the current posted speed was determined. Oftentimes, citizens have requested the city or county to change a posted speed.

Obtaining the approval to post different speeds requires time and effort. On very low volume roads, the city or county may conduct a traffic investigation. On higher volume roads, ODOT will typically perform the investigation or delegate the responsibility to the city or county if they have the necessary expertise. If that investigation shows that a lower speed is appropriate, ODOT may issue a speed zone order to allow local authorities to post a lower speed limit. Cities and counties may post statutory speeds, i.e., 25 mph on residential roadways (meeting the definition in statute), without issuance of a speed zone order if there is no existing order that sets a different speed.

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