

# TRAFFIC AND SAFETY INFORMATIONAL SERIES

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTION #18

### HOW DO YOU DECIDE WHERE TO PLACE SIGNS?

Street signs cannot be randomly placed along a roadway. Although the aesthetics of a street sign can sometimes be undesirable, these signs are often necessary to keep roadways safe and to prevent driver or pedestrian confusion. According to the *Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices* (MUTCD), the general rule on sign placement is to locate signs on the right-hand side of the roadway. This is where drivers will be looking for signs. Overhead signs may be necessary on expressways or roadways where roadside space is not available. In certain cases, signs are placed on traffic controlled islands or on the left-hand side of the road. Signs should also be placed so they remain visible (i.e., away from trees, etc.). The spacing between signs is determined by the expected vehicle speed, so that there is adequate time for drivers to read, understand, and make appropriate driving decisions.

#### WHO DECIDES WHERE A SIGN WILL BE PLACED?

Only a public agency or an official having jurisdiction for the purpose of regulating, warning, or guiding traffic can place traffic signs. In many cases, the use and/or location of these traffic signs are warranted by physical conditions and field studies. For example, signs are often essential at specific places, at specific times, or where hazards are not self-evident. A large amount of thought can go into their placement. Local officials also do not want to use signs excessively. Too many signs are expensive, can confuse motorists, and reduce the effectiveness of the signs that are warranted and necessary. This can produce a situation where drivers begin to ignore signs even where they are needed.

Street signs are only placed in the publicly owned roadway right-of-way. The width of right-of-way can vary from roadway to roadway and also along an individual roadway. For a number of reasons, the portions of this publicly owned land adjacent to the roadway are often maintained by adjacent private property owners. This area is publicly owned, however, and can be used for roadway signing purposes if required.

#### WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF TRAFFIC SIGNS?

There are several hundred signs used along public roadways. These signs need to be located within the publicly owned right-of-way of these roadways. The exact placement of these signs must follow the requirements contained in the MUTCD. In general, there are three categories of signs:



*Regulatory* signs usually have a black legend on a white background. They convey information about specific traffic regulations that the driver must obey.



*Warning* signs usually have a black legend on a yellow background. These diamond-shaped signs are used to warn drivers of impending hazards that they are approaching.



*Guide* signs are usually have a white legend on green, blue, or brown background. These signs provide directional guidance to drivers.

## REGULATORY SIGNS

Regulatory signs are organized into six series according to the type of regulation they convey:

1. The *right-of-way series* includes stop signs and yield signs. These are used at at-grade intersections.
2. The *speed series* includes a variety of speed signs used to post legal speed limits. These include the typical speed limit sign and truck, night, and minimum speed limit signs, as well as the signs alerting drivers to changes in speed regulations. These signs are located as needed (to remind drivers of the speed limit) and according to MUTCD requirements.
3. The *movement series* contains a wide variety of signs affecting specific vehicle maneuvers. This series includes turn signs, alignment signs, exclusion (e.g., “Do Not Enter”) signs, and one-way signs.
4. The *parking series* is mostly found in urban and suburban areas. These signs are used for curb control and parking. There are numerous situations where these signs are used, and their content can become complex.
5. The *pedestrian series* includes both legend and symbol signs. These signs include “No Hitch-Hiking,” “Use Crosswalk,” “Walk on Left Facing Traffic,” and other signs.
6. The *miscellaneous series* contains all of the regulatory signs that do not fit into any of the other categories. Some examples include “Keep Off Median” and road closure signs.

## WARNING SIGNS

Warning signs are primarily for those drivers not familiar with a particular roadway or its hazards. These signs must be posted far enough in advance of a hazard that the driver can see the sign and then respond to the warning sign before reaching the hazard. The MUTCD describes how these signs should be located, and the 11 types of conditions for which warning signs may be placed:

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| 1. changes in horizontal alignment,    | 7. grades,                       |
| 2. intersections,                      | 8. roadway surface conditions,   |
| 3. advance warning of control devices, | 9. railroad crossings,           |
| 4. converging traffic lanes,           | 10. entrances and crossings, and |
| 5. narrow roadways,                    | 11. miscellaneous.               |
| 6. changes in highway design,          |                                  |

## GUIDE SIGNS

Guide signs are also important to drivers who are unfamiliar with the roadway. A confused driver can be a dangerous driver. Some of the most common guide signs are

1. *Route markers*. These signs are important. The MUTCD indicates that “. . . route markers shall be used to identify and mark all numbered highways.”
2. *Destination signs*. These signs are used to display the distance to critical destinations along the route. At major junctions, diagrammatic guide signs may be used.
3. *Service guide signs*. These signs provide directions to a variety of motorist services. These services typically include food, lodging, fuel, and camping.
4. *Recreational and cultural interest area signs*. These signs include directions to historic, recreational, and cultural areas of interest.
5. *Milepost signs*. These are the small signs that indicate the mileage along a designated route. These signs are useful and allow drivers to estimate their progress along a route or locate their vehicle if it should stall. On certain freeways, mileposts are located every 0.10 mile.

### For more information

For more information, please contact \_\_\_\_\_.