



TRAFFIC AND SAFETY MANUAL

Chapter 5 – Speed Limits

5A – Process for Establishing Speed Limits

Process for Establishing Speed Limits

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General

The purpose of this chapter is to provide general information and guidance relating to establishing speed zones on primary roadways under the jurisdiction of the Iowa DOT. Statute speed limits can be found in [Chapter 321.285 of the Iowa Code](#).

For information on establishing and posting reduced speed limits in temporary traffic control zones refer to [Section 9A-4](#) of the Iowa Dept. of Transportation Design Manual.

The Office of Traffic and Safety has a brochure “[Speed Limit Questions? Here’s Your Answer](#)” intended as a handout for cities, counties and local residents which explains the rationale used in setting reasonable speed limits and helps answer commonly asked questions about speed limits. This pamphlet is available from the Office of Traffic and Safety as well as the six District Offices.

Additional information on speed zoning can be found on the Center for Transportation Research and Education (CTRE) website; FAQ #10 “Why Do You Choose the Posted Speed Limit and Where Do You Put the Signs?”, www.ctre.iastate.edu/pubs/tsinfo/index.htm.

Requesting Speed Zone Change

Establishing speed zones on the primary highway system is the responsibility of the Iowa DOT. Any jurisdiction or individual can request a review of an existing speed zone to determine if a change is appropriate. The Office of Traffic and Safety conducts the review after receiving requests from the Districts.

Speed Zone Review

A speed zone review includes a thorough investigation of many roadway and operational features. These include:

- road type and surface (curve, hill, etc.);
- location and type of access points (intersections, entrances, etc.);
- existing traffic control devices (signs, signals, etc.);
- crash history;
- traffic volume;
- sight distances;

- pedestrian activity; and
- results of a field review and speed study.

The most important part of the traffic investigation is the speed study. When choosing a speed drivers take many roadway environment factors into consideration. Therefore, the speed that the majority of the people consider prudent is an important value. Data is collected using a laser speed gun at selected locations on the roadway under ideal driving conditions. A technical analysis is done on the results to determine the 85th percentile. This is the value indicating the speed which most (85%) drivers are traveling at or below. Experience has shown that a posted speed limit near this value is the maximum safe and reasonable speed.

After completion of the speed zone review, the Office of Traffic and Safety will forward a recommendation and a copy of the study to the District. A District Representative will then share the recommendation with the jurisdiction or individual who requested the review. Once a decision is made at the District level, the Office of Traffic and Safety is notified.

Staff Action

If a change in the speed zone is determined appropriate, the Office of Traffic and Safety prepares a Staff Action which includes a sketch describing the existing and proposed speed zones. An approved Staff Action is required before a new speed zone can be installed on the roadway.

Posting of Signs

The final step in establishing a new speed zone is to install the regulatory speed limit signs. See [Section 2A-8](#) of this Manual for the proper placement of speed limit signs.

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