



The Institute of Transportation Engineers
Traffic Engineering Council
presents TIPS on



Speed Limits

How are speed limits established?

In general, the governing body which has jurisdictional control over a roadway has the power to establish the speed limit for that roadway. This is done by adopting a resolution or by passing an ordinance to establish the speed limit. The State's Department of Transportation gives the final authority to establish and enforce the speed limit.



The matter of establishing the posted speed limit for a given roadway is a serious concern for the traffic engineer. It is based in part upon the characteristics of the

roadway and its associated design speed. The design speed defines the values used for the design of a particular road and includes elements such as curve radii, stopping sight distance, and lengths of merges and tapers.

Speed limits are also established in part by the drivers themselves. In order for a speed limit to be effective, it must be reasonable to the driver. Most drivers tend to regulate the speed of their vehicle relative to traffic, road and weather conditions.

For a speed limit to be effective, the majority of the drivers must voluntarily comply with the law. It has been determined that the speed at which 85 percent of the motorists travel is reasonable and safe. The determination of the 85 percentile speed is made by conducting a speed survey of vehicles traveling along the roadway in question during normal operating conditions. Therefore, basing the speed limit upon this 85th percentile speed will insure a higher

level of compliance and create a reasonable uniform flow of traffic.

Other factors which are also used in making a determination of the posted speed limit include road surface characteristics, shoulder condition, grade (i.e., steepness of the road), roadside development, parking practices, pedestrian activity, and accident experience.

Once the engineering study has been completed and forwarded to the proper governing bodies for passage and approval, the required signs are then posted. Their placement and installation conforms to the Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices (MUTCD), which serves as the standard for the design, placement and installation of all traffic control devices.

Speed limits cannot be posted in excess of legislatively mandated speed limits. From 1974 to 1995, the U.S. Congress also imposed the 55 mph National Maximum Speed Limit (NMSL). In 1995, Congress repealed the NMSL and returned control of maximum speed limits to the states.

