

TRAFFIC AND SAFETY INFORMATIONAL SERIES

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTION #18

HOW ARE THE LOCATIONS OF TRAFFIC SIGNS DECIDED?

Traffic signs cannot be randomly placed along a roadway. Although the aesthetics of a traffic sign can sometimes be undesirable, these signs are often necessary to provide information intended 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, where drivers will be looking for them. Overhead signs may be necessary on expressways or roadways where sufficient roadside space is not available. In certain cases, signs are placed on median islands or on the left-hand side of the road. Signs should also be placed so that they remain visible (e.g., away from trees and other obstructions) both during the day and at night. The spacing between signs is determined by the vehicle speeds at a given site and is chosen to give drivers adequate time to read and understand the signs and make appropriate driving decisions.

WHO DECIDES WHERE A TRAFFIC SIGN WILL BE PLACED?

Only a public agency or an official having jurisdiction over a roadway can place traffic signs for the purpose of regulating, warning, or guiding traffic, and a large amount of thought can go into their placement. In many cases, the use and/or location of traffic signs is warranted by the physical conditions at a given site and field studies. For example, signs are often essential at specific places to introduce or reinforce information (e.g., speed limits) or to provide warning where hazards are not self-evident. However, local officials do not want to use signs excessively. Too many signs are expensive, can confuse motorists, and can reduce the effectiveness of the signs that are warranted and necessary. Too many signs can also produce a situation where drivers begin to ignore signs even where they are needed.

Traffic signs are only placed in the publicly owned roadway right-of-way. The width of the right-of-way can vary by location. For a number of reasons, portions of the right-of-way 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?

Several hundred signs are used along public roadways. These signs must be located within the publicly owned right-of-way of these roadways, and 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 might not be readily apparent.



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

These three categories of traffic signs are described in more detail below.

Regulatory Signs

Regulatory signs fall into six general categories based on the type of regulation they convey:

1. *Right-of-way signs* include stop signs and yield signs. These are used at at-grade intersections and crossings.
2. *Speed signs* include a variety of signs used to post legal speed limits. These include the typical speed limit signs; truck, night, and minimum speed limit signs; and 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. *Movement signs* include a wide variety of signs affecting specific vehicle maneuvers. These signs provide information on permissible and prohibited movements and include turn signs, alignment signs, exclusion signs (e.g., “Do Not Enter”), and one-way signs.
4. *Parking signs* are mostly found in urban and suburban areas. These signs are used for curb control and parking.
5. *Pedestrian signs* include both legend and symbol signs such as “Use Crosswalk” and “Walk on Left Facing Traffic.”
6. The *miscellaneous remaining signs* include all regulatory signs that do not fit into any of the other categories. Some examples include “Keep Off Median,” “Stop Here on Red,” and road closure signs.

Warning Signs

Warning signs are primarily intended for drivers who are unfamiliar 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 before reaching the hazard. The MUTCD describes how these signs should be located and identifies three categories of warning signs:

1. *Roadway-related signs* indicate changes in horizontal alignment, vertical alignment, cross section, roadway surface conditions, and weather-related hazards.
2. *Traffic-related signs* include advance traffic control, traffic flow, intersection, vehicular and nonvehicular traffic, and new traffic pattern signs.
3. *Other supplemental plaques* include location, high-occupancy vehicle lane, distance, directional arrow, street name, intersection, “Share the Road,” and photo enforcement signs.

Guide Signs

Guide signs are important to drivers who are unfamiliar with a particular roadway, in that a confused driver can be a dangerous driver. Some of the most common guide signs are as follows:

1. *Route signs* are those signs placed along a roadway to inform drivers of the route they are travelling on. The MUTCD indicates that “all numbered highway routes shall be identified by route signs and auxiliary signs.”

2. *Destination signs* are used to display the distance to critical destinations along the route. At major junctions, diagrammatic guide signs may be used.
3. *Specific service guide 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* include directions to historic, recreational, and cultural areas of interest.
5. *Milepost signs* are the small signs that indicate the mileage along a designated route. These useful signs allow drivers to estimate their progress along a route or locate their vehicle if it should stall. As an augmentation to mileposts on some facilities, intermediate reference location signs showing the tenth of the mile with a decimal point may be installed at intervals of one tenth of a mile or at some other regular spacing.