

Changing a Speed Limit

Have you ever wondered how speed limits are determined? Who sets them? Does lowering speed limits slow down traffic? How do you get one changed? Would changing a speed limit solve a problem? This brochure will help answer some of these questions.

What Speed Limits Do

Speed limits are established to reflect the reasonable speed of the majority of drivers on a particular roadway. Most drivers naturally select a comfortable speed, not too slow or not too fast, but one that will get them where they want to go safely and without undue delay.

Speed limits are posted primarily to inform motorists of the speed considered reasonable by a majority of drivers on a particular roadway. Motorists, especially those unfamiliar with the road, can use this information to evaluate how they should drive on a particular road. A safer driving environment is established when motorists drive at the same speed.

Setting Speed Limits

State law* requires speed limits on state roadways be set at the state maximum, unless traffic and engineering studies show a need to lower a limit for safety reasons. The law sets the state maximum at:

- 75 mph for turnpikes and certain rural interstates
- 70 mph for four-lane divided highways including interstates and super two-lane highways
- 65 mph for other locations on the highway system

How are speed limits set? When setting speed limits, city governments and the Oklahoma Department of Transportation (ODOT) must conduct engineering studies in accordance with traffic engineering practices as stated in the Manual of Uniform Traffic Control Devices (MUTCD) adopted by the Oklahoma Transportation Commission. Speed limits on highways outside city limits are approved by the Commission. When inside city limits, the speed limits are still approved by the Commission but usually with city concurrence. Citizen requests for speed zone studies on highways should be made to their local ODOT division office.

ODOT only has jurisdiction over setting speed limits on the state highway system. Questions about speed limits on city streets or county roads should be directed to the transportation departments of those local governments.

**Special situations exist under Oklahoma State Law for school buses, school zones, state parks, solid tires, motorcycles, motor-driven cycles, scooters, low and medium speed electric vehicles, electric mopeds, and electric personal assistive mobility devices. For more information on these, see Oklahoma State Statutes §47-11-801 through 806.*

Speed Zone Studies

Speed limits on Oklahoma highways are set by the 85th percentile method, which represents the speed the majority of drivers will be traveling at or below. This is a sound engineering principle used to set speed limits on highways nationwide for the past 60 years.

Speed studies are conducted to determine the 85th percentile speed. The observed free-flowing speed for vehicles is tallied and the 85th percentile speed is calculated using gathered information. To ensure a true reflection of a normal traffic situation, speed studies are made on weekdays during off peak hours under favorable weather conditions.

Other data collected typically shows roadway features such as curves, surface width and type, right of way width, crash history, cross streets, school crossings and sites that generate traffic.

The speed limit is normally set at the nearest value to the 85th percentile speed ending in a 5 or 0. The 85th percentile speed is that speed at or below which 85% of the vehicles are traveling during the study period. In rare situations, the posted speed limit may be lowered a small amount below the 85th percentile speed if some conditions are present, such as: narrow pavement width, hidden street returns, high number of driveways, and high crash ranking.

Once the study is completed, black-on-white speed limit signs are posted along the highway to alert drivers of the maximum legal speed for a particular section of roadway.



Speed limits may change periodically; however, the penalties do not. Drive Oklahoma friendly.

Can a Speed Limit Be Too Low?

There are disadvantages to setting speed limits far below the 85th percentile speed. If reasonable drivers see an unreasonably low speed limit without seeing a need to drive that slowly, they tend to ignore the signs and develop disrespect for speed limits in general.

When a speed limit is set below the 85th percentile; law enforcement officials must deal with reasonable people being ticketed for exceeding the posted limit, as well as motorists who drive too fast.

Safety is the Primary Concern

Most traffic problems are not simple and do not have simple solutions. Requests for lower speed limits are sometimes made with the admirable motive to “quick fix” a particular problem. However, rarely does a single traffic control tool solve all the traffic problems in a community.

Research has shown that speed limits set below the reasonable speed of most drivers do not significantly reduce the number of crashes on a road. In fact, crashes may increase with unreasonably low speed limits.