

Speed Limits – Frequently Asked Questions



The function of speed limits is often misunderstood by the public. This confusion leads to typical questions that include:

- What are speed limits?
- What purpose do they serve?
- How are speed limits set?
- What do the different speed limit signs mean?

The Office of the State Traffic Administration (OSTA) has produced this pamphlet to answer these and other questions about speed limits.

*** All speed limits on public roads, whether owned by the state or town, must be approved by the OSTA.**

WHY ARE SPEED LIMITS ESTABLISHED?

Speed limits are established to move traffic in a uniform and safe manner. In Connecticut, the OSTA, in conjunction with the Local Traffic Authorities (LTA) of the individual towns/cities, establishes speed limits for all public roads. In Connecticut, the legislature has established a statewide maximum speed limit of 65 mph.

Speed limits on our state highways are established for ideal driving conditions and must be approved by the OSTA. During inclement weather, motorists should adjust their operating speeds accordingly. In addition, no motorist should operate a motor vehicle at a rate of speed or in such a manner as to endanger the lives of vehicle occupants or any other person. Any infringement of these common sense practices shall be considered a violation (Connecticut General State Statutes Section 14-218a Traveling Unreasonably Fast; 14-219 Speeding and 14-222 Reckless Driving).

The OSTA, in cooperation with town/city officials, also establishes speed limits on locally maintained roads. However, speed limits are not normally established on unimproved,

dirt, or gravel roads because of variations in seasonal roadway surfaces. Roads of insufficient length (usually 500' or less) do not warrant or need a speed limit.

HOW DOES CONNECTICUT DOT DETERMINE THE REGULATORY SPEED LIMITS?

The OSTA sets regulatory speed limits on state and local roads based on an engineering investigation. Principal factors considered are:

- road type and surface (curve, hill, etc.)
- location and type of access points (intersections, entrances, etc.)
- existing traffic control devices (signs, signals, etc.)
- accident history
- traffic volume
- sight distances
- test drive results
- radar observations

Radar speed observations are an important part of the traffic investigation. When choosing a speed, drivers take many roadway environment factors into consideration. Therefore, the speed that the majority of people consider prudent is an important value. Data is collected by performing radar checks at selected locations on the roadway under ideal driving conditions.

A technical analysis is done on the results to determine the 85th percentile speed. This is the value indicating the speed under which most (85%) drivers are travelling at or below. Experience has shown that a posted speed limit near this value is the safe and reasonable speed. However, there are exceptions (high accident frequency, volumes, etc.).

Engineering judgment is a very important tool. The traffic investigator must use knowledge of nationally accepted principles combined with experience to assign the safe speed.

WHAT ARE THE TYPES OF SPEED LIMITS?

REGULATORY SPEED LIMIT SIGN

This black and white sign shows the maximum speed that a motorist may travel under ideal conditions. It must be authorized by the OSTA after consulting with the LTA of the town/city in which it is placed.



ADVISORY SPEEDS



Engineers erect advisory speed plates to help drivers select safe speeds at hazardous locations, such as horizontal curves, intersections, exit ramps, or steep downgrades. The hazardous location warrants a lower speed than the general or posted speed limit, but rather than lowering the limit at each such location, traffic engineers post an advisory speed plate instead. Advisory speeds are not legally enforceable except under the basic speed law, which states that motorists must operate at speeds that are reasonable and prudent for conditions.

WHAT ARE SPECIAL TYPES OF SPEED ZONES?

SCHOOL SPEED LIMITS IN SCHOOL ZONES

These can be established on state roads after an investigation by the Division of Traffic Engineering and approval by the OSTA, or local roads after an investigation and approval by the OSTA. The regulatory speed limit which is approved by the OSTA is in effect during school hours when the lights attached to the sign assembly are flashing. The school plate is black and fluorescent yellow-green and the speed limit sign is black and white.



SPEED LIMITS IN WORK ZONES



Advisory speed limits are used to identify safe speeds for a specific condition within a work zone. The signs are installed by the appropriate governing authority. These black and orange signs are used in advance of work areas.

Temporary construction zone speed limits are regulatory speed limits established for long term construction projects or detour routes. These black and white signs are used when a reduced speed is needed for driver safety. Valid 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, these signs are installed under the authority of the Commissioner of Transportation or OSTA for any roadway.



QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

Won't lowering the speed limit reduce speeds?

NO. Studies show that there is little change in the speed pattern after the posting of a speed limit. The driver is much more influenced by the roadway conditions.

Will lowering the speed limit reduce crash frequency?

NO. Although lowering the speed limit is often seen as a cure-all in preventing crashes, this is not the case. Crashes are most often the result of driver inattention and driver error. If a posted speed limit is unrealistically low, it creates a speed variance (i.e., some drivers follow the speed limit while most drive the reasonable speed). This speed variance can contribute to crashes.

Why do we even have speed limits?

A uniform speed of vehicles in a traffic flow results in the safest operation. The posted speed limits can keep the traffic flowing smoothly provided the majority of drivers find the speed limits reasonable. To do this, the limits must be consistent throughout the state. The speed limits also give the motorist an idea of a reasonable speed to drive in an unfamiliar location. The speed limits are used by police officials to identify excessive speeds and curb unreasonable behavior.

WHOM DO I CONTACT?

EXPRESSWAYS

For regulatory and advisory speed limit information on the expressway system, you may contact the OSTA.

If you believe there is a safety concern or an inappropriate speed limit posted, the person to contact depends on the type of road. See below:

UNLIMITED ACCESS STATE HIGHWAYS AND LOCAL ROADWAYS

For these roadways, you may contact your LTA of the town in question who, if in agreement, will make a formal request to the OSTA.

FOR REGULATORY SPEED LIMITS

The LTA can contact the OSTA requesting an investigation for speed limits on local roads. Based upon the results, the OSTA, if in agreement, may then authorize the municipality to post new speed limits.

FOR ADVISORY SPEED PLATES

You may contact your LTA concerning local roads or state roads. The LTA will forward concerns regarding state roads to the Department's Division of Traffic Engineering if deemed warranted.

FOR SPEED LIMITS ON PRIVATE ROADS

You may contact your LTA. These speed limits may be established without OSTA approval.

The telephone numbers to call for state or local assistance can be found under government listings. If you are unable to find the proper telephone number, you may call the Connecticut Department of Transportation Information Center:

1-860-594-2000 General Information

1-860-594-3020 Office of the State Traffic Administration

1-860-594-2788 Division of Traffic Engineering

Related Statutes:

Sec. 14-218a. Traveling unreasonably fast. Establishment of speed limits. (a) No person shall operate a motor vehicle upon any public highway of the state, or road of any specially chartered municipal association or any district organized under the provisions of chapter 105, a purpose of which is the construction and maintenance of roads and sidewalks, or on any parking area as defined in section 14-212, or upon a private road on which a speed limit has been established in accordance with this subsection, or upon any school property, at a rate of speed greater than is reasonable, having regard to the width, traffic and use of highway, road or parking area, the intersection of streets and weather conditions. The Office of the State Traffic Administration may determine speed limits which are reasonable and safe on any state highway, bridge or parkway built or maintained by the state, and differing limits may be established for different types of vehicles, and may erect or cause to be erected signs indicating such speed limits. The traffic

authority of any town, city or borough may establish speed limits on streets, highways and bridges or in any parking area for ten cars or more or on any private road wholly within the municipality under its jurisdiction; provided such limit on streets, highways, bridges and parking areas for ten cars or more shall become effective only after application for approval thereof has been submitted in writing to the Office of the State Traffic Administration and a certificate of such approval has been forwarded by the office to the traffic authority; and provided such signs giving notice of such speed limits shall have been erected as the Office of the State Traffic Administration directs, provided the erection of such signs on any private road shall be at the expense of the owner of such road. The presence of such signs adjacent to or on the highway or parking area for ten cars or more shall be prima facie evidence that they have been so placed under the direction of and with the approval of the Office of the State Traffic Administration. Approval of such speed limits may be revoked by the Office of the State Traffic Administration at any time if said office deems such revocation to be in the interest of public safety and welfare, and thereupon such speed limits shall cease to be effective and any signs that have been erected shall be removed. Any speed in excess of such limits, other than speeding as provided for in section 14-219, shall be prima facie evidence that such speed is not reasonable, but the fact that the speed of a vehicle is lower than such limits shall not relieve the operator from the duty to decrease speed when a special hazard exists with respect to pedestrians or other traffic or by reason of weather or highway conditions.

(b) The Office of the State Traffic Administration shall establish a speed limit of sixty-five miles per hour on any multiple lane, limited access highways that are suitable for a speed limit of sixty-five miles per hour, taking into consideration relevant factors including design, population of area and traffic flow.

(c) Any person who operates a motor vehicle at a greater rate of speed than is reasonable, other than speeding, as provided for in section 14-219, shall commit the infraction of traveling unreasonably fast.

Sec. 14-219. Speeding. (a) No person shall operate any motor vehicle (1) upon any highway, road or any parking area for ten cars or more, at such a rate of speed as to endanger the life of any occupant of such motor vehicle, but not the life of any other person than such an occupant; (2) at a rate of speed greater than fifty-five miles per hour upon any highway other than a highway specified in subsection (b) of section 14-218a for which a speed limit has been established in accordance with the provisions of said subsection; (3) at a rate of speed greater than sixty-five miles per hour upon any highway specified in subsection (b) of section 14-218a for which a speed limit has been established in accordance with the provisions of said subsection; or (4) if such person is under eighteen years of

age, upon any highway or road for which a speed limit of less than sixty-five miles per hour has been established in accordance with subsection (a) of section 14-218a, at a rate of speed more than twenty miles per hour above such speed limit.

(b) Any person who operates a motor vehicle (1) on a multiple lane, limited access highway other than a highway specified in subsection (b) of section 14-218a for which a speed limit has been established in accordance with the provisions of said subsection at a rate of speed greater than fifty-five miles per hour but not greater than seventy miles per hour, (2) on a multiple lane, limited access highway specified in subsection (b) of section 14-218a for which a speed limit has been established in accordance with the provisions of said subsection at a rate of speed greater than sixty-five miles per hour but not greater than seventy miles per hour, (3) on any other highway at a rate of speed greater than fifty-five miles per hour but not greater than sixty miles per hour, or (4) if such person is under eighteen years of age, upon any highway or road for which a speed limit of less than sixty-five miles per hour has been established in accordance with subsection (a) of section 14-218a, at a rate of speed more than twenty miles per hour above such speed limit, shall commit an infraction, provided any such person operating a truck, as defined in section 14-260n, shall have committed a violation and shall be fined not less than one hundred dollars nor more than one hundred fifty dollars.

(c) Any person who violates any provision of subdivision (1) of subsection (a) of this section or who operates a motor vehicle (1) on a multiple lane, limited access highway at a rate of speed greater than seventy miles per hour but not greater than eighty-five miles per hour, or (2) on any other highway at a rate of speed greater than sixty miles per hour but not greater than eighty-five miles per hour, shall be fined not less than one hundred dollars nor more than one hundred fifty dollars, provided any such person operating a motor vehicle described in subsection (a) of section 14-163c shall be fined not less than one hundred fifty dollars nor more than two hundred dollars.

(d) No person shall be subject to prosecution for a violation of both subsection (a) of this section and subsection (a) of section 14-222 because of the same offense.

(e) Notwithstanding any provision of the general statutes to the contrary, any person who violates subdivision (1) of subsection (a) of this section, subdivision (1) or (2) of subsection (b) of this section while operating a truck, as defined in section 14-260n, or subdivision (1) of subsection (c) of this section while operating a motor vehicle or a truck, as defined in section 14-260n, shall follow the procedures set forth in section 51-164n.

Sec. 14-222. Reckless driving. (a) No person shall operate any motor vehicle upon any public highway of the state, or any road of any specially chartered municipal association or of any district organized under the provisions of chapter 105, a purpose of which is the construction and maintenance of roads and sidewalks, or in any parking area for ten cars or more or upon any private road on which a speed limit has been established in accordance with the provisions of section 14-218a or upon any school property recklessly, having regard to the width, traffic and use of such highway, road, school property or parking area, the intersection of streets and the weather conditions. The operation of a motor vehicle upon any such highway, road or parking area for ten cars or more at such a rate of speed as to endanger the life of any person other than the operator of such motor vehicle, or the operation, downgrade, upon any highway, of any motor vehicle with a commercial registration with the clutch or gears disengaged, or the operation knowingly of a motor vehicle with defective mechanism, shall constitute a violation of the provisions of this section. The operation of a motor vehicle upon any such highway, road or parking area for ten cars or more at a rate of speed greater than eighty-five miles per hour shall constitute a violation of the provisions of this section.

(b) Any person who violates any provision of this section shall be fined not less than one hundred dollars nor more than three hundred dollars or imprisoned not more than thirty days or be both fined and imprisoned for the first offense and for each subsequent offense shall be fined not more than six hundred dollars or imprisoned not more than one year or be both fined and imprisoned.

A FINAL SAFETY NOTE

Remember to always use good judgment and drive at a safe and reasonable speed for the existing conditions. This is every driver's responsibility. Also, please be mindful that there is a heightened concern about the risk of texting and talking while driving because there are three types of distraction: visual, manual, and cognitive.

Connecticut Department of Transportation
Office of the State Traffic Administration
2800 Berlin Turnpike
Newington, CT 06131-7546