

Speed Limits

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September 23, 2020 | 2020-R-0232

Issue

Describe (1) how speed limits are set, including the factors considered when determining them, and (2) any recent legislative proposals to modify speed limit jurisdiction. This report updates OLR Report [2003-R-0673](#).

Summary

The Office of the State Traffic Administration (OSTA), which is part of the Department of Transportation (DOT), has authority over all regulatory speed limits on public roads in the state. OSTA is directly responsible for setting speed limits on state-owned roads. For municipally-owned roads, the local traffic authority (LTA) establishes speed limits, but they must be approved by OSTA before taking effect. The entity designated as the LTA varies by town, but may be the board of selectmen, police commission, mayor, town manager, police chief, or traffic authority ([CGS § 14-297\(6\)](#)); see OSTA's [Directory of Local Traffic Authorities](#)).

OSTA sets and approves speed limits based on studies conducted in accordance with traffic engineering practices. The studies consider road type and surface geometry, crash history, traffic volumes (including non-vehicular traffic), and speed data, among other things. OSTA uses study results and engineering judgement to determine a speed limit that is realistic and comfortable and that will be respected by drivers.

In the two most recent legislative sessions, the Transportation Committee considered a proposal that would allow LTAs to lower speed limits on certain roads, bridges, and parking areas under their jurisdiction without OSTA approval. [HB 6590 \(2019\)](#) passed the House of Representatives; [HB 5324, § 2 \(2020\)](#) was publicly heard on February 27, 2020, but the committee did not take action before the legislature shut down due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Setting Speed Limits

Jurisdiction

State law grants OSTA the authority to set “reasonable and safe” regulatory speed limits on state-owned highways, bridges, and parkways. By law, OSTA must establish a 65 mph limit on multiple lane, limited access highways that are suitable for this speed, taking into consideration relevant factors such as design, population of area, and traffic flow ([CGS § 14-218a](#)).

A town’s LTA may establish speed limits on streets, highways, bridges, or parking areas for 10 or more cars that fall within the town’s jurisdiction. However, the limits do not take effect until OSTA issues the LTA a certificate of approval. Additionally, OSTA may revoke its approval of speed limits as it deems necessary to protect public safety or welfare ([CGS § 14-218a](#)).

LTAs may establish speed limits on privately-owned roads that are wholly within the town without OSTA approval.

Considerations

According to OSTA, the purpose of speed limits is to advise drivers of the reasonable and safe operating speed for a road under favorable conditions. When setting speed limits, the primary goal is to determine a realistic and comfortable limit that will be respected by drivers. Speed limits that meet this goal result in uniform operating speeds, thus reducing erratic driving behaviors like passing slower vehicles.

As required under the federal Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices (MUTCD) (see below), OSTA sets or approves speed limits based on engineering studies that have been performed in accordance with traffic engineering practices. According to OSTA, principal factors considered are:

1. road type and surface geometry (e.g., horizontal and vertical curvature, roadway classification, lane widths, and pavement condition);
2. location and type of access points (e.g., intersections, entrances, etc.);
3. existing traffic control devices (e.g., signs and signals);
4. crash history;
5. vehicular traffic volumes;
6. presence and volumes of non-vehicular traffic (e.g., pedestrians and bicyclists);
7. sight distances;
8. test drive results;

9. latest available speed data;
10. recommendations from federally-provided tools and software; and
11. engineering judgement.

According to OSTA's speed limit approval [application](#), it generally considers speed limits less than 25 mph to be unrealistically low for public roads unless there are severe geometric conditions or unique roadway or roadside characteristics. Consequently, LTAs that request a speed limit lower than 25 mph must provide a detailed explanation of the conditions or characteristics that warrant consideration of a lower limit.

MUTCD. State law requires OSTA to adopt regulations for the uniform design and placement of all traffic control devices, including signs and signals ([CGS § 14-298](#)). As required by federal law, OSTA has adopted the federal [Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices](#) (MUTCD) as its regulations concerning traffic control devices ([23 C.F.R. § 655.603](#); [Conn. Agencies Regs. § 14-298-500](#)). The MUTCD sets standards for establishing speed zones, which OSTA and LTAs must follow when determining regulatory speed limits (MUTCD, section 2B.13).

Recent Legislation

In the two most recent legislative sessions, the Transportation Committee has considered a proposal to allow LTAs to lower speed limits on certain roads, bridges, and parking areas under their jurisdiction without OSTA approval ([2019 HB 6590](#) and [2020 HB 5324, § 2](#)). Specifically, the bills would have allowed LTAs to reduce an OSTA-approved speed limit of 35 mph or lower by up to 15 mph. Before doing so, the LTA would have to (1) hold a public hearing on the proposed lower speed limit and (2) notify OSTA of the lower limit.

In 2019, the bill was reported favorably by the Transportation Committee and passed the House of Representatives on a 142 to 3 vote; the Senate took no action. In 2020, the Transportation Committee held a public hearing on the proposal but did not meet to vote on bills before the legislature shut down due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

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