



Traffic Guidelines Manual

ORIGINATOR State Traffic Engineer	2-1-3
CHAPTER 2	Signing
SECTION 1	General
SUBJECT 3	Standardization

Although the Department exercises no control over the usage of non-conforming signs on other systems, except on sections being built under state contracts, the Department can and *should* be looked to for direction in preserving the uniformity of all traffic control devices. Signs are of special concern because they can be designed in almost endless variation.

[Part 1](#) of the MUTCD gives specific positive purposes for the use of standardized traffic control devices. If these were closely followed by all agencies there would be no need for further discussion. Unfortunately, there are some who believe that non-uniform signs are more effective, generally because of their uniqueness. The following discussion is intended to counter this attitude and service as a resource in replying on the subject of uniformity or objecting to the use of non-conforming signs.

While it *should* be quite clear as to the purposes of signing for the benefit of the motoring public, there are other purposes for signing which *may* be installed on streets and highways, some of which have no benefit to motorists at all. These side purposes *may* include efforts to:

- Attract
- Notify, inform
- Advertise
- Educate
- Influence
- Propagandize
- Memorialize
- Placate
- Landmark
- Reinforce

The consequences of displaying non-conforming signs would be expected to mainly affect the motorist, but sometimes *may* affect others, such as pedestrians. These consequences *may* include:

- Misinterpretation
- Incorrect message
- Message contrary to law
- Distracting from driving task
- Distracting from important signs
- Incomprehensive message
- Generation of humor rather than seriousness
- False trust by others (pedestrians)
- Wasted money
- Bad precedent
- Loss of respect
- Poor materials (deterioration)
- Poor aesthetics
- Liability

Examples

Some specific examples follow which are intended to explain why the usage is undesirable.

Slow Children

The use of this sign is probably the most common non-standard to be found on local streets. It is typically a black on yellow rectangular sign, with a running child figure. A variation *may* add the phrase “at play.” It is often shown in sign catalogs.

The purpose of this sign is largely to placate the residents. While their concern for the safety of their children is understandable, the real issue is not being addressed, which is the hazard caused by children either playing in the street or entering the street without exercising care. Both of these actions are illegal. The sign therefore tends to endorse illegal actions, and that is why it *should* not be used.

Motorist Stop/Yield to Pedestrians

This sign is commonly a red and white rectangle, but could have several variations. It is usually erected at the crosswalk. A variation seen in other states refers to children and is probably used at crossings of neighborhood school routes. The departure from shape, color and message tends to diminish the impact of conforming signing. It *should* be expected that the public is slightly confused as to what is expected at these “special” places. The most serious reason why they *should* not be used would be if the pedestrians themselves observed the signs and reacted differently, thereby not exercising their normal caution. In Wisconsin, pedestrians have the right of way only if they do not cause the motorist to have difficulty in stopping.

Black Spot

This sign apparently is used in foreign countries and perhaps in this county to indicate the scene of one or more fatal accidents. It is intended to warn motorists of a perceived dangerous location as well as to memorialize the location. In Wisconsin crosses have been erected by private persons to do the same thing. The negative aspects of this activity are the possibility that motorists will be distracted, that the location is only randomly the scene of a fatality, that the sign itself *may* be an obstruction to sight or otherwise an obstacle; that the sign is not informative as to what the hazard might be if there was one; and the prospect that the memorial will be unpleasant to local people if the victim was local.

Directional Signs to Generators

In a recent contract funded with federal aid, provisions were made to install directional signs on a downtown street. The design of the signs was non-conforming regarding the MUTCD Sections [1A.02](#) and [2D.02](#) through [2D.08](#). The signs had two-color backgrounds, had arrows set in circles, which were black and white and raised above the sign surface and extended out beyond the edge of the sign, and had letter fonts and sized which would have made the signs illegible to the motoring public. The signs were removed from the project.

This was admittedly an extreme case of non-conformance. However, it is our obligation to advise that there are definite standards on all features of guide signs. To the extent that signs depart from any of these standards, the motoring public is not served, but rather some other interest is being addressed, some of which are listed above, along with the consequences.