

Speed Zones and Speed Humps

Speed Zones

Speed zones are often taken for granted and until a problem arises, most people pay little attention to the theory behind them. The following information will help you understand how speed zones are established, and what they can and cannot do.

Speed Zone Misconceptions

When traffic problems occur, concerned citizens frequently ask why we don't lower the speed limit. There are widely held misconceptions that speed limit signs will slow the speed of traffic, reduce accidents and increase safety. Most drivers drive at a speed that they consider to be comfortable, regardless of the posted speed limit. "Before and after studies have shown that there are no significant changes in average vehicle speeds following the posting of new or revised speed limits.

Speed Laws

All fifty states base their speed regulations on the Basic Speed Law: "No person shall drive a vehicle at a speed greater than is reasonable or prudent and in no event at a speed which endangers the safety of persons or property."

Under California law, the maximum speed limit in urban areas is 55 MPH. All other speed limits are called prima facie limits, which are considered by law to be safe and prudent under normal conditions. Certain prima facie limits are established by State law and include the 25 MPH speed limit in business and residential districts, the 15 MPH speed limit in alleys, and at intersections and railroad crossings, where visibility is very limited. These prima facie speed limits may be enforced without being posted.

Speed limit between 25 and 55 MPH are established on the basis of traffic and engineering surveys (California Vehicle Code - Section 627). These surveys include an analysis of roadway conditions, accident records and a sampling of the prevailing speed of traffic. A safe and reasonable limit is set at or below the speed at which 85% of the drivers drive.

Traffic flowing at a uniform speed results in increased safety and fewer accidents. Drivers are less impatient, pass less often, and tailgate less, which reduces both head-on and rear-end collisions.

The posting of the appropriate speed limit simplifies the job of traffic officers, since most of the traffic is voluntarily moving at the posted speed. Blatant speeders are easily spotted, safe drivers are not penalized, and traffic officers aren't asked to enforce unrealistic and arbitrary speed limits.

Speed Humps

Speeding on residential streets is a common complaint reported by concerned citizens. Speed humps are often requested because they are perceived as a quick and effective solution to speeding. Research has shown, however, that speed humps are not always an effective or safe traffic control device.

What are Speed Humps?

On public streets speed humps are 12 ft. long by 3 in. high ridges of pavement placed across a roadway that theoretically force cars to slow down as they pass over them. They are intended to be uncomfortable to drive over if crossed over to quickly.

Are Speed Humps Safe?

Several tests throughout the world on speed humps have raised questions about their safety and effectiveness. Test results indicate:

- Speed humps do not significantly reduce vehicle speeds once the vehicle has left the speed hump. In fact, the discomfort and shock sometimes decrease as vehicle speeds increase.
- Speed humps may present a potential hazard to all vehicles and particularly to bicyclists, motorcyclists and emergency vehicles, i.e. police cars, fire trucks and ambulances.
- Speed humps cannot be designed to meet the specifications for all types of vehicles because of the wide variety of handling and ride characteristics.
- Traffic volumes on streets adjacent to streets where the humps are located often increase when drivers try to avoid the speed humps.
- Speed humps increase noise levels 10 to 20 decibels when wheels hit the pavement. Increased noise is particularly bothersome in residential areas.

Liability

Speed humps are not recognized by the State of California as an official traffic control device. Injuries caused by speed humps may result in significant additional liability for the City. Results of various studies have raised concern about the potential dangers of speed humps.

For these reasons, the City of Huntington Beach does not use speed humps on public streets.

If you have questions, requests or suggestions concerning traffic, please call the Traffic Engineering Division at (714) 536-5431.