Improving Neighborhood Traffic Safety

Frequently Asked Questions

City of Janesville

City of Janesville - Engineering Division is sharing information with the community regarding traffic safety, speeding, and the use of stop signs. Please find below general information about these topics. For questions, contact the Engineering Division at 755-3171.

Janesville residents care a lot about their neighborhoods, especially when it comes to keeping them safe. Concern with traffic safety and speeding often came up as an area of significant concern at neighborhood meetings. The City receives many questions about whether installing stop signs, traffic signals, or changing the speed limit might help to improve traffic safety. What often seems like a simple way to make streets safer may in fact not be – and that's because of good old-fashioned human behavior.

We have compiled the following "frequently asked questions" and answers regarding traffic safety:

Will the City install speed limit signs on my neighborhood streets?

State law has set the speed limit on residential streets at 25 MPH whether posted or not.

In most residential areas in Janesville, the speed limit is not posted, but all Wisconsin drivers are expected to know it is 25 miles per hour. The 25 MPH limit may be posted; 1) to indicate a change when entering residential areas from a higher speed (35 MPH or higher) major street, or 2) when the "residential" street is classified as an arterial. This reduces the number of signs in neighborhoods because numerous signs can become unsightly and generally have no real effect on speeds.

What can be done about speeding in my neighborhood?

The Police Department works hard to monitor areas of the city where residents have contacted the Department with a concern. Ultimately, while Police and Engineering are happy to investigate concerns about speeding and neighborhood traffic, there is no substitute for driver caution and common sense. Setting reasonable limits, posting speed limit signs where justified, enforcement, and public education can be more effective than changing a speed limit or installing a stop sign where one is not justified. The Police Department also has a speed readout trailer which can be placed at problem locations. Contact the Police Department at 608/755-3100 for more information.

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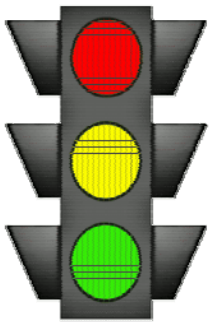
Why doesn't the City lower the posted speed limit to slow traffic on arterial and collector streets?

A common belief is that drivers comply with the speed limit where it is posted. The facts indicate otherwise. Studies conducted throughout the country show that drivers are influenced more by the surface of the roadway and existing traffic conditions than by the posted speed limit. Since studies show that most motorists drive at a speed which they consider to be reasonable and safe under existing roadway conditions, the more reasonable the speed limit is, the more likely it will be complied with. If a posted speed limit is lower than is needed to travel safely, many drivers will simply ignore the signs and the average speed will likely be higher. In 1994, the City increased speed limits on some major streets to more accurately reflect prevailing speeds. Actual driver speeds on those streets, however, remained nearly the same as before the posted limits were changed.

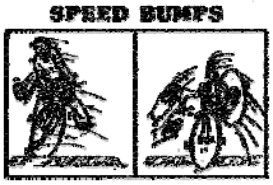
If the speed limit is set artificially low, some drivers will stay with the posted limit. This generally causes conflict between faster and slower vehicles, creates few gaps in traffic when pedestrians can cross safely, and it becomes difficult for pedestrians to judge the speed of approaching vehicles. Studies indicate where uniformity of speed is not maintained, the frequency of accidents generally increases. Therefore, unrealistically low limits can create a false sense of security for neighborhood residents and travelers, and may actually result in reduced safety and caution.



Will more stop signs slow traffic on our street?

Residents may request a stop sign or signal believing that it will help solve a speeding problem. However, stop signs installed in the wrong places usually create more problems than they solve. Installing a stop sign to slow traffic can result in; 1) high incidences of intentional violations, 2) higher mid-block speeds after the stop sign is installed, 3) traffic diverting to other roadways, and 4) increased fuel consumption and air pollution. Also, some drivers and particularly bicyclists tend to disregard stop signs, especially where a stop does not appear to be necessary. Motorists on through streets usually pay less attention to traffic on stop-sign-controlled intersecting streets. When a less attentive motorist meets a stop-sign-ignoring one, there is a greater potential for accidents. For these reasons, the Federal Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices states "Yield or Stop signs should not be used for speed control".

Will the City install speed bumps on my residential street?



No. Speed bumps can cause problems with snow plows, snow and ice removal, street cleaning, emergency vehicles, and non-vehicle traffic (motorcycle, moped, and bicycle). Some unsuspecting motorists may drive over the bumps at high speeds creating vehicle damage and excessive noise. Others may speed up between the bumps to make up lost time or divert to other streets to avoid the bumps, transferring a speeding problem from one area to another. Because they can be a hazard to the unwary, a challenge to the daredevil, and a disruption to the movement of emergency vehicles, speed bumps are not used on Janesville's residential streets.

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Why are there intersections without stop or yield signs?

Intersections that are uncontrolled (that is, where there are no stop signs, yield signs, or traffic signals) may appear unreasonably dangerous. However, Stop and Yield signs are installed to provide safe traffic control at an intersection when certain conditions are met. Studies have shown that an uncontrolled intersection with low traffic volumes and speeds will experience the same or lower accident rates than controlled intersections. Once stop or yield signs are installed, speeds on the "through" street will likely increase because the driver assumes traffic from the other direction will comply with the traffic control. Whereas, if neither of the approaches to a residential intersection is controlled, both directions of travel tend to slow down. Drivers begin to question traffic control devices that appear not to be needed. Therefore, neighborhood streets with low traffic volumes tend to operate best under the State Right-of-Way law where one vehicle is required to yield but both vehicles have an obligation to enter the intersection with caution.

Why doesn't the City install "Children At Play" signs in my neighborhood?

The Federal Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devises does not recognize these signs as proper traffic control devices. They create a false sense of security for parents and children who believe the signs provide an added degree of protection, which they do not and cannot provide. Motorists, particularly local ones, pay little attention to them especially after they end up installed in all neighborhoods with children. The use of these signs has long been abandoned by most jurisdictions since the signs are a direct and open suggestion that playing in the street is acceptable behavior.

Does the occurrence of a traffic accident mean something should be changed with the roadway or traffic control device?

No. As tragic and unfortunate as accidents are, the sad fact is they occur on a regular basis in otherwise perfect conditions. Humans inherently make mistakes, and many accidents are caused by inattentiveness, impatience, influence of alcohol or other drugs, or poor judgment. We keep track of accidents city-wide every year, and there are typically about 1,400 reported accidents each year. The reports are filed by location in the Engineering Division and are used to evaluate problem locations and potential improvements.

How do I make a request for a traffic control change (yield, stop, all-way stop, traffic signals, speed limit change, adult crossing guard, etc.)?

When the Engineering Division receives a request to install signs, signals, or change a speed limit, they study and carefully evaluate the traffic situation. They examine issues like; roadway conditions, traffic volumes and speed, pedestrian crossings, vision characteristics, and crash history. If a request for change meets the established criteria, the request is considered by the City Council and implemented upon approval. If the request does not meet the established criteria, it is not implemented.