



Speed Limits

Your Safety ▶ Your Mobility ▶ Your Economic Opportunity



Why do we have speed limits?



Speed limits establish how fast motorists can drive in a manner that is safe and prudent for conditions. The posted limit is a maximum speed that is safe to drive when there are no obstacles or distractions, and the pavement is dry.

Limits cannot replace common sense, so the speed motorists drive on a slick and/or wet road may be much lower than the maximum posted speed allows. Having speed limits helps law enforcement by encouraging a safer traffic flow.

How are speed limits set?

Per federal guidelines, ITD uses the 85th percentile speed of free-flowing traffic to determine a safe and reasonable speed. Traffic engineers set the speed limit at which 85 percent of the traffic is already driving at or slower. This reflects a safe speed as determined by the vast majority of drivers. Traffic limits that reflect the behavior of the majority of motorists are the most successful. Laws restricting the majority of drivers encourage violations, lack support, and generally fail to produce changes in driving behavior.

The speed study or “investigation” involves determining the design and location of the road. Engineers analyze lane width, pavement type and condition of the road. They also look at terrain, parking conditions, residential development along the road, and the number of entrances and in tersecting streets.

The study also involves looking at traffic volumes, accident frequency, and the effect of traffic-control devices such as stoplights and stop signs.

In 2012, the Idaho Legislature passed HB619. It directed ITD and the Idaho Transportation Board to set speed limits on state highways within city limits. The legislation says, in part, “In establishing speed limits within city limits, ITD must do an investigation and base posted speeds on sound traffic engineering safety standards.”



Does reducing a speed limit result in safer driving conditions?

Not necessarily. Reducing the speed limit below the 85th percentile speed can result in conditions that are unsafe because of speed variance between vehicles. National research shows that there are fewer accidents when speeds are set according to the 85th percentile.

Studies have shown that merely reducing a speed limit has little effect on the speed motorists travel. Enforcement of the speed limit by law-enforcement agencies is essential. No published research findings link higher speed limits with more crashes.