

Why can't you just lower the speed limit to control those speeders? How are speed limits set?

The posted speed limit for a road is set in slightly different ways in different counties. The most common way though, is to use the “85th percentile” speed. 85 out of 100 drivers will choose this speed no matter what the signs say. Many studies have shown this method to be safe, practical and enforceable. It also doesn't depend on the opinion of one person.

Most motorists are safe drivers. This is backed by the fact that most motorists do not get tickets or have accidents. Most drivers can judge a safe speed based on what they see on a road. They do not travel at a speed they feel is dangerous.

Only a few drivers tend to be reckless or have faulty judgment that need police to help them understand. Speed limits set at, or only slightly below, the 85th percentile speed give police a way to deal with those drivers that refuse to obey the rules. Studies have shown that speed limits higher than the 85th percentile are usually not reasonable and safe.

The 85th percentile speed is easily determined with special traffic counters that check the traffic on the roadway. The speed limit can then be set at the next lower 5 miles per hour. For example, if the traffic counters show 38 mph, the limit would be set at 35 mph. The speed limit may be set another 5 mph lower if there are features not obvious to the driver. These may include unusual roadside or traffic conditions including a high number of accidents.

Things such as road width, curves, grades, and surface conditions that are obvious to the driver do not require a reduced speed limit. The Engineer may use warning signs if the conditions are local and hard to see.

Studies have shown that setting too low of a speed limit has very little affect on those who ignore the speed limit in the first place. In fact, unreasonably lowering the speed limit may lead to disrespect and even contempt for those who make and enforce the laws, making enforcement against the few even harder.

Too low of a speed limit can also cause increased driver anger, dangerous passing, and rear end accidents. This happens when a motorist driving at what they think is a reasonable and safe speed come upon slower drivers because of the low-posted speed limit. Speed limits lower than the 85th percentile do not help the orderly movement of traffic and can cause other safety problems.

Not all counties follow exactly the same procedures in setting speed limits. Call your local County Engineer for how they are set on your county roads.

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Questions about this article, or any of the series, or on other topics related to County Roads, may be directed either to your County Engineer, or to Al King, P.E., County Road Administration Board, Olympia, at Al@CRAB.Wa.Gov.