

SPEED LIMITS ON TOWN ROADS

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The setting of speed limits is largely controlled by the Minnesota Department of Transportation. There are, however, some opportunities for local governments to set speed limits on their roads.

The basic speed rule that applies to all roads at all times is that no person shall drive a vehicle at a speed greater than is reasonable and prudent under the conditions. Minn. Stat. § 169.14. Drivers are assumed to be aware of actual and potential hazards and their speed must be restricted as may be necessary to avoid a collision. Similarly, drivers are expected to reduce speeds when approaching stopped emergency vehicles, railroad crossing, curves, hills, and when special hazards exist. Beyond these basic statements, the legislature has created some specific speed limits that apply to town roads.

A. Urban District



Speeds in an urban district are not to exceed 30 m.p.h. Minn. Stat. § 169.14, subd. 2(a)(1). “Urban district” means the territory contiguous to and including any city street or town road that is built up with structures devoted to business, industry, or dwelling houses situated at intervals of less than 100 feet for a distance of a quarter of a mile or more.” Minn. Stat. § 169.011, subd. 90. To increase the likelihood of enforcement, towns with roads that qualify as urban districts should adopt a resolution making that finding and directing the erection of the appropriate speed limit signs.

B. Rural Residential District



Speeds are not to exceed 35 m.p.h. on a town road in a rural residential district if adopted by the town board. Minn. Stat. § 169.14, subd. 2(a)(8). Before the adoption of this law, speed limits in rural platted areas that did not meet the definition of an “urban district” were at the default 55 m.p.h. speed limit. Even applying the provisions of the basic speed rule, the speeds experienced in these areas created many safety concerns. To address these concerns, the legislature originally created a 30 m.p.h. speed limit for town roads within plats that qualified as a rural residential districts. However, in 2009 the legislature raised the limit to 35 m.p.h. in these districts and expanded the definition so that it is no longer limited to town roads within plats. Under the new definition, a rural residential district “means the territory contiguous to and including any city street or town road that is built up with visible dwelling houses situated at intervals averaging 300 feet or less for a distance of a quarter of a mile or more.” Minn. Stat. § 169.011, subd. 69a.

Furthermore, “interval” is the distance, measured along the centerline of the roadway, between the primary access points for adjacent dwelling houses, regardless of whether the dwelling houses are located on the same side of the road.

Another aspect of the law is that the speed limit signs must be erected before the limit goes into effect. Previously, the limit applied in these districts without the need to post signs. Towns that, prior to August 1, 2009, posted a 30 m.p.h. sign on what was previously considered a rural residential district road, the limit remains in effect despite the change in the law, at least until the speed sign is replaced. Minn. Stat. § 169.14, subd. 5f.

C. Residential Roadways



Speeds may not exceed 25 m.p.h. on roads designated by the road authority as a residential roadway. Minn. Stat. § 169.14, subd. 2(a)(7). “Residential roadway” means a city street or town road that is less than one-half mile in total length.” Minn. Stat. § 169.011, subd. 64. The primary purpose of this limit is to allow the local road authority some discretion in setting speed limits where the need arises on short roads. The scope of this law was reduced in 2009 where before a one-half mile segment of a longer road could be designated a residential roadway, now the designation can only apply to a road that has a total length of less than one-half mile.

The road authority (town board) must take action to designate the residential roadway and erect signs indicating the speed limit. Signs must also be posted to designate the beginning and end of the residential roadway. An ordinance or resolution should be adopted to designate the roadway.

D. Alleys



Speeds in alleys may not exceed 10 m.p.h. Minn. Stat. § 169.14, subd. 2(a)(6). Local road authorities are authorized to set speed limits in alleys based upon their own engineering and traffic investigations. Limits set at other than 10 m.p.h. are effective upon the posting of the proper signs.

E. Non-Designated Areas



Speeds may not exceed 55 m.p.h. in locations that are not designated by law or a Department of Transportation speed study with a different speed limit. Minn. Stat. § 169.14, subd. 2(a)(3). This default speed limit is what applies to a majority of town roads.

F. Speed Study Established Limits

If a local road authority believes a speed limit on one of its roads is greater or lesser than is reasonable or safe under existing conditions, it may request the Department of Transportation to conduct an engineering and traffic investigation (speed study) to determine if a different speed limit is appropriate. Minn. Stat. § 164.14, subd. 5. These requests are usually made by resolution.

Speed studies are typically only conducted during the summer months when the weather is good and the roads are dry. Once the Department completes a study, it will certify a speed limit and authorize the road authority to erect signs for that limit. The new limit is effective upon the erection of the signs. If requesting a speed study on a road that has something less than a 55 m.p.h. limit, the road authority must keep in mind that if it is asking for the limit to be reduced, the study may actually result in the limit being increased.

Once a speed is established by a speed study, the speed may not be changed except as authorized by the Department of Transportation. The town board cannot simply disregard the certified limit and stay with the speed limit that was there before. The expressed exceptions to this rule are the authority of local road authorities to set a school speed limit and to limit speeds to 30 m.p.h. in urban districts.

G. School Zones

Local road authorities may establish a school speed limit within a school zone of a public or nonpublic school based upon an engineering and traffic investigation as prescribed by the Department of Transportation. Minn. Stat. § 169.14, subd. 5a. The limit may not be lower than 15 m.p.h., and may not be more than 30 m.p.h. below the established speed limit on the affected road. The school speed limit is effective only when children are present and must be marked with the beginning and end of the school zone.

H. Work Zones

Local road authorities are authorized to reduce maximum speed limits in road work zones when workers are present. Minn. Stat. § 169.14, subd. 5d(c). An engineering and traffic investigation is not required in order to set a work zone limit. On roads with an established speed limit of 55 m.p.h. or greater, the road authority may reduce the maximum speed limit by up to 20 m.p.h. On roads with an established speed limit of 50 m.p.h. or less, the road authority may reduce the maximum speed limit by up to 15 m.p.h. The limits are in effect once the proper signs are posted. The signs must indicate the beginning and end of the reduced work speed zone and must be covered or removed when they are not in use.

I. Park Roads

A town with a park may establish a speed limit on a road within the park. Minn. Stat. § 169.14, subd. 5e. The limit must be based on an engineering and traffic investigation prescribed by the Department of Transportation and must not be lower than 20 m.p.h. or reduce existing limits by more than 15 m.p.h. Speed limit signs must be erected as well as signs indicating the beginning and end of the reduced speed zone.

J. Manufactured Home Parks and Camping Areas



Within the limits of a manufactured home park or recreational camping areas, vehicles are not to exceed 10 m.p.h. Minn. Stat. § 327.27. Signs indicating the speed limit are to be posted within the park and may be enforced by local law enforcement. Local road authorities may pass an ordinance to increase the speed limit within the manufactured home park, but the limit may not exceed 30 m.p.h.