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August 30, 2011

## New Road Signs Will Now Wait

By MICHAEL COOPER

It is a sign of the times: The Obama administration is planning to *yield* to strapped states and local governments who urged them to *slow or be prepared to stop* federal safety requirements that they replace thousands of road signs with bigger, brighter, more legible signs by 2018, arguing it would be the *wrong way* to make them to spend their limited money.

The administration plans to issue a proposal Tuesday to eliminate dozens of deadlines for replacing traffic signs to comply with safety standards initiated under the Bush administration, saying that communities should not be forced to install the new signs until the old ones wear out, officials said.

"A specific deadline for replacing street signs makes no sense and would have cost communities across America millions of dollars in unnecessary expenses," Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood said in a statement. "After speaking with local and state officials across the country, we are proposing to eliminate these burdensome regulations. It's just plain common sense."

The recommendations calling for the new signs were in the most recent edition of the "Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices," a book of national road sign standards published by the Federal Highway Administration that is to street planners what Strunk and White is to writers or Hoyle's is to gamblers. If its strictures are sometimes mocked as picayune and procrustean — "When a mixed-case legend is used, the height of the lower-case letters shall be 3/4 of the height of the initial upper-case letter" — they are designed to make driving safer by helping aging drivers read traffic signs more easily, especially at night.

If the reprieve is likely to be met with relief by beleaguered local transportation officials, it is also likely to be met with dismay by safety advocates, who say the changes would save lives. Although only a quarter of travel takes place at night, highway officials have said, more than half of all traffic fatalities occur then. Safety advocates say that more legible signs, with better reflective properties, would allow drivers to spend less time reading signs and more time keeping their eyes on the road.

The new proposal calls for eliminating the 2018 deadline for replacing certain street name

signs to meet minimum “retroreflectivity” standards, which make them easier to read at night, and requiring larger lettering. But the Department of Transportation wants to retain a dozen deadlines for sign upgrades that it says are critical to public safety. These include requirements for installing “One Way” signs at intersections with divided highways or one-way streets, and requiring “Stop” or “Yield” signs to be added at all railroad crossings without automatic gates or flashing lights.

Many local officials — and the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials — had expressed concerns about the new federal requirements. Some cities complained that replacing signs could cost them millions of dollars at a time when they are deferring other maintenance projects to save money.

States complained as well: Idaho officials wrote in January that “there is a real need to avert costs that may not have a good return on investment with regard to a meaningful safety benefit — at a time when all public agencies within Idaho can least afford it.” New York State’s Transportation Department said it was “very concerned that the necessary resources may not be available” to meet the deadlines.

The American Road and Transportation Builders Association took another tack. It said the new requirements would “result in significant roadway safety improvements,” and argued that the federal government “should leave the compliance dates as currently written and focus much greater attention on ensuring that federal funding will be provided to local governments.”

But in recent months Republicans in Congress have proposed cutting transportation spending, not spending more.

## The Road Signs Are A-Changin': Part 2

Posted on Wednesday August 31st by Eric Jaffe

Well the road signs will still be a-changing, just not as fast as they seemed to be last fall. That's when the Department of Transportation opened a public review period on new road sign standards established by the latest Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices ([pdf](#)). The changes originally required states to replace many of their old signs within a few-ish years, a mandate that drew complaints from many cash-strapped departments of transportation around the country.

About 600 comments later, the D.O.T. agreed to eliminate 46 of the deadlines established in the new manual. That means states and localities can wait until signs wear out naturally before replacing them. Posting the news on his Fast Lane blog, Secretary Ray LaHood said he completely agreed that "it doesn't make sense to spend precious dollars to replace perfectly good signs." Even Milwaukee's Bob Donovan, one of the loudest critics when the regulations were first announced, released a quote of relief to USA Today.

Of course, by lifting the deadlines, the D.O.T. is authorizing the delay of changes that are designed to increase safety. The original deadlines required states to meet new reflectivity standards for street signs by 2018 (see Page I-4 of the manual) — a change that would make them easier to see at night. And the updated guidelines require many new signs to use a mixed-type (as opposed to all-caps) Clearview font that studies have shown improves readability; on a 55 m.p.h. highway, for instance, the Clearview lettering should provide two additional seconds of response time ([pdf](#)).

Still the D.O.T. kept a dozen deadlines in place for upgrades that it considers "critical to public safety":

These safety-critical sign upgrades include installing "ONE WAY" signs at intersections with divided highways or one-way streets and requiring STOP or YIELD signs to be added at all railroad crossings that don't have train-activated automatic gates or flashing lights.

Sounds reasonable enough. Though if it takes a sign to get you to look around before crossing railroad tracks, you probably need more than a deadline to save you.