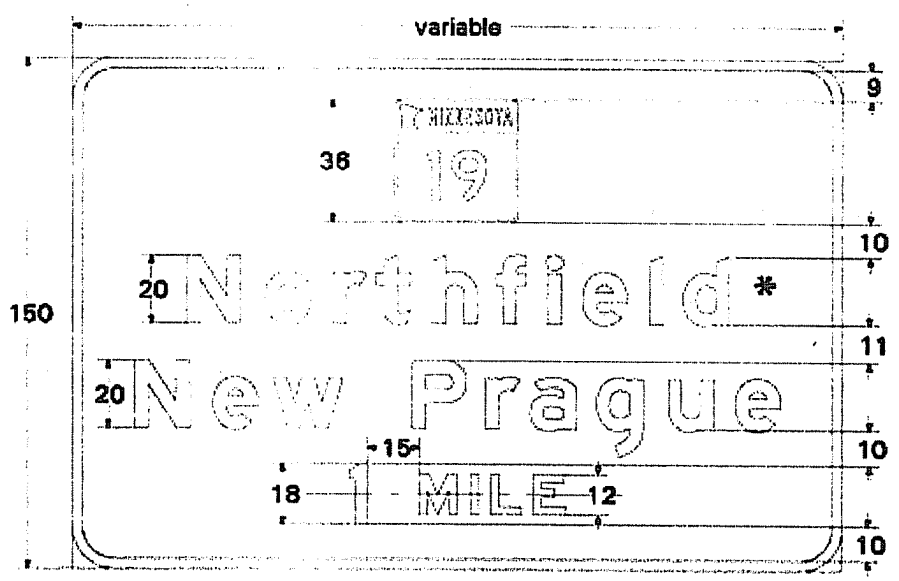


Franken to Feds: Want new road signs? Help pay for 'em

By Derek Wallbank | Published Thu, Jan 13 2011 10:11 am



MnDOT Freeway sign dimensions from the 2010 Mn/DOT Traffic Guide Sign Design Manual.

WASHINGTON — Driving along a snowy road one late January evening in northern Minnesota, a driver flies through an intersection and is T-boned by an oncoming car. The driver hadn't seen the stop sign, old and faded off to the side.

That's the scenario federal officials envisioned when they created a rule that every road sign in America must adhere to new federal reflectivity guidelines by 2018. Stop signs and other safety signs must follow the new brightness guidelines by 2015.

However, unless new money is made available to replace every functioning sign in Minnesota, that old, tired sign will still be standing solitary and unsafe because, as state officials and Sen. Al Franken warn, there just isn't the money to replace it. Compounding the problem, the state would be at risk of being penalized and losing federal highway dollars for failing to meet federal guidelines.



REUTERS/Jason ReedSen. Al Franken

"Minnesota takes road safety seriously," Franken wrote in a letter to Victor Mendez, head of the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), noting that the state had begun a pilot program to replace signs, but that the federal standards were updated after that pilot began, and thus many new signs are already out of spec. Thus, he said, officials should "ease the burden on states like Minnesota, which have made a good-faith effort to meet" the requirements.

"At minimum, FHWA should provide more flexibility in meeting the 2018 deadline and make additional funds available to assist local governments with the costs of meeting these requirements," Franken wrote. "I am confident that it is possible to craft the... requirements to effectively promote passenger safety without placing an infeasible mandate on states."

Decision date looming

The push for leniency comes now because Friday is the cut-off date for public comments on implementation dates. As of now, the rules require:

- By 2012: A plan in place for implementation across a given jurisdiction;
- By 2015: All safety signs, including stop signs and yield signs, must be replaced;
- By 2018: All road signs must be replaced.

According to the FHWA, states must "use higher performing reflective materials on all highway signs. The new rule also requires public agencies to adopt sign maintenance methods to ensure highway signs can be read from greater distances." The goal, said then-Administrator J. Richard Capka, was that "the new standards will make highway signs as visible as possible to drivers in low-light conditions. The holidays are meant to be merry and bright, and now highways will be safer and brighter."

Officials from the federal Department of Transportation and its Federal Highway Administration (which promulgated the rules under the Bush administration in 2007) said Wednesday that it's unlikely the federal government will chip in additional funds for sign replacement. States are already given hundreds of millions of dollars annually, they say, and could use it on new signs if they wanted to.

The federal commitment on that increased federal standard, outside of normal transportation monies, consists of \$3 million authorized in the last surface transportation

bill. The money was secured by then-Sen. Mark Dayton for a pilot program to replace signs in a handful of counties. That money has all been spent.

Left to go: Thousands on thousands of signs, which the Minnesota Department of Transportation expects would cost between \$55 million to \$76 million. The Minnesota Association of Townships estimates the cost even higher than that, \$80 million or more for just the state's 1,785 townships, not counting small cities. Nationally, it would be billions of dollars.

Costs were the reason the regulation was reopened for public comment, said federal Department of Transportation officials, who are weighing a relaxation of the implementation guidelines because of the increased costs that local governments would incur.

Instead of directly funding the upgrades, the options under most consideration are keeping the status quo guidelines or relaxing the implementation guidelines, either by adding years to an implementation date certain or via the method Franken and state officials are pushing for.

Option three, as it were, would grandfather in all current road signs, while requiring new signs to meet the reflectivity standard. That would mean all signs in Minnesota would meet the new reflectivity guidelines by about 2025. And advocates of that extension see some hope in the statement LaHood made when this regulation was reopened for review.

"I believe that this regulation makes no sense," LaHood said in November. "It does not properly take into account the high costs that local governments would have to bear. States, cities, and towns should not be required to spend money that they don't have to replace perfectly good traffic signs.

"To set things right, the first step is to reopen public comment and give people a chance to weigh in. There have got to be better ways to improve safety without piling costs onto the American people. Safety is our priority, but so is good government. Listening to the public helps to ensure both."