MUTCD Road Standards Update Designed to Improve Safety

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The federal government released a new edition of the *Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices for Streets and Highway* (the MUTCD) in December 2023. The 11th Edition revises how speed limits are set, recommends a "safe systems" approach, and doubles its focus on bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure.

What is the MUTCD?

The MUTCD defines the standards used by road managers nationwide to install and maintain traffic control devices on all streets, highways, pedestrian and bicycle facilities, and site roadways open to public travel. It is a compilation of national standards for all traffic control devices, including road markings, highway signs, and traffic signals. That familiar red, octagonal stop sign seen across the nation is a result of the MUTCD. Complying with the MUTCD's standards helps protect transportation agencies, including municipalities, from liability and ensures that they comply with rules for federally funded projects.

The MUTCD is updated periodically to accommodate the country's changing transportation needs and to address new technologies, traffic control tools, and traffic management techniques.

What Has Changed?

The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, a.k.a. the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, required the Federal Highways Administration (FHWA) to update the MUTCD to provide for the protection of vulnerable road users and support for the safe testing of automated vehicle technology, among other considerations. The updated MUTCD doubled the size of the section on bicycle and pedestrian-oriented infrastructure.

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- **Speed limits setting** – Currently, speed limits must be set based on an engineering study. The 85th-percentile speed is no longer the sole consideration for setting speed limits. The new standard recommends weighing six factors when setting speed limits: the roadway environment, roadway characteristics, geographic context, crash experience, speed distribution, and an analysis of speed trends.
- **New types of bicycle facilities** – The updated MUTCD specifically refers to a Bikeway Selection Guide that FHWA released in 2019. Separated bicycle lanes are in the MUTCD for the first time, and there are good illustrations of how to do them and to manage them at intersections. Painting bicycle lanes green and introducing special traffic signals for cyclists now have been endorsed.
- **Standardizing pedestrian-oriented devices** – The updated document includes standards for the location of push buttons for people with disabilities at signalized intersections, along with standardized crosswalk markings and audible signals.

The updated MUTCD also includes:

- **New signing options for directions to electric vehicle charging stations.**
- **New section addressing automated vehicles.**
- **Safety and operational improvements** - New criteria for warning signs for horizontal alignment changes, and new application of traffic control devices for part-time travel on shoulders to manage congestion.

The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act required that the MUTCD be updated every four years to ensure its standards and guidelines are responsive to the needs of the traveling public and to new technologies.

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What is the Effective Date for Complying With the MUTCD Updates?

Vermont adopted the previous MUTCD as its standard. It has until January 18, 2026 to adopt this version or have a state MUTCD/supplement that is in substantial conformance with the national manual.

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