

# Inspecting signs – day and night – a must

Warning signs, regulatory signs, informational signs—all are vital to driver safety and functioning. But signs don't live forever. It's your duty to check and replace them regularly, especially now with new FHWA minimum reflectivity standards due out this year.

Keeping signs in good shape helps ensure driver safety and also protects your municipality from liability in case of a lawsuit. Safety consultant William Wiedenbeck offered a number of suggestions about sign inspections at a recent T.I.C. Safety Workshop.

Signs generally have a useful life of 10 to 12 years, depending on exposure, snow plowing mishaps, theft, vandalism, and sometimes unknown factors. "Signs can be funny," says Wiedenbeck. "You can have two identical signs at an intersection and one will go bad and the other doesn't."

**Inspect top coat** Look for cracks and feel the surface. Newer reflective sheeting seems to develop cracks sooner but maintains reflectivity longer than older engineering grades, Wiedenbeck says. Visible cracks that haven't broken the top coat may not degrade reflectivity. A heavily cracked sign looks shabby, however, and may distract drivers, even if it is still functional.

**Observe color** Make sure red signs stay true red. When yellow signs get so pale they look white at night, it is an indication that reflectivity will decline dramatically within a year. Even if motorists accept them, faded color can become a factor in a legal case.

"There's no doubt that FHWA's new standards will have an impact in the future," says Wiedenbeck. "There's always a sign out of sight around the corner that can go bad when

nobody is looking. But if you have an inventory and planned maintenance it will considerably reduce those situations."

**Assign responsibility** Give one person the job of routinely inspecting signs in daylight and at night and recording the results. Plan the activity; don't expect it to "just happen." Too often sign maintenance and inventory take a back seat to other obligations.

**Keep an inventory** A well-maintained inventory can track sign age and flag the ones to check. Inventory systems help with budget projections, staffing assignments, and work zone signing plans. Record all relevant information each time a sign is replaced to help the next person who must service it. Adding an installation date to the required ID code on the sign back will aid the inventory and help in accident investigations.

*To learn more about sign inspection, maintenance and inventory management, plan to attend the T.I.C.'s next Safety Workshop. Watch Crossroads and your mail for course announcements.*



*Night inspections are crucial. This sign which seems fine in daylight, is barely visible at night. White measured 4.5 candlepower, yellow 2; the minimum is 35.*

## Reader Response

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