

CROSSROADS

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"I tell the board and committee members to this day that one of the best things they ever were involved with and supported was the controlled access ordinance."

Control driveway access for safe, efficient roads

PROPERTY OWNERS are entitled to reasonable access, and all citizens benefit from efficient, safe roadways. But as areas develop these two rights can be in conflict. Roadway safety is threatened by accesses that are too close together, hidden from drivers' view, or create hazards in the right of way. Average speeds go down, making the system less efficient.

Local road agencies can serve both property owners and the driving public with an effective, up-to-date access ordinance. Good communication with land developers, buyers and owners is essential, along with consistent fair enforcement. It is also important to work closely with planning and zoning departments and have strong support from elected officials.

Winnebago County adopted a comprehensive access control policy about six years ago soon

after John Haese began working for the highway department. "Developers were requesting a number of different accesses to county highways in rural areas," says Haese, Winnebago County Highway Commissioner. "These added traffic conflict points would increase the potential for accidents. As a consequence, residents and local citizens would be asking for lower speed limits."

It took more than a year to develop and implement an access control ordinance. "I tell the board and committee members to this day that one of the best things they ever were involved with and supported was the controlled access ordinance," says Haese. He worked on it with Bob Braun from Zoning and Planning, Corporation Counsel John Bodnar, and staff member Mark Frank, and got help from the Highway Committee and the County Board.

Reviews of property access must consider medians, intersections, traffic signals, and left turn lanes, but the biggest concern is driveways, especially those entering collector and arterial highways and roads. Studies show that large numbers of driveways increase congestion, reduce traffic flow, and increase crash rates. An ordinance should specify the maximum number of access points per mile and set minimum spacing requirements for each functional classification of road.

"We have a non-proliferation policy for access points," says Jeff Durkee, P.E., Highway Engineer for St. Croix County. "Access requests are at a record pace here." St. Croix, probably the fastest growing county in the state, just did a comprehensive update to its access and land development ordinance, effective January 1, 2006.

Slower growing communities and rural areas may not see this as a problem. However, no ordinance means no guidelines and no framework for solving problems that occur later.

"The key is to get a good uniform ordinance in effect. It should spell out access policy and inform the public how rules will be administered. Then the ordinance will protect local roads from public requests for lower speed limits, and you will continue to have 55 MPH speed zones not 45 or 25," says Haese.



Manage driveway spacing, numbers, locations, and construction with an effective access control ordinance.

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Permits, requirements, and pressure

An access ordinance should define permits; set criteria for spacing, location, design, and construction; and establish penalties and enforcement powers. Permits are an early warning system. They help you prevent a problem before it gets built. Requiring changes later is costly and difficult. Also, work with other departments to ensure that you review access when the maps or zoning requests first come in.

The permit process lets you check the site and talk with the owner about potential problems. It is important to do this quickly. In St. Croix County the highway department staff try to make a personal visit within 48 hours of getting the permit request.

"People requesting a driveway permit often don't know what they really want or need," says Jeff Durkee, P.E., St. Croix County Highway Engineer. "A site visit is imperative, and talking with the owner we can say: 'You'll have lots of troubles if you put the driveway here.'" He can explain sight distances and other safety concerns and point out problems like low spots in the driveway path.

Design and construction specs in the ordinance help keep the right of ways safe, assure emergency vehicle access to the buildings, and manage drainage. The Winnebago County ordinance, for example, prohibits concrete or rock piles around culverts and requires driveway side slopes to be 4:1 with vegetation only. Driveway surfaces must be at least 24' wide, and the approach at the road must slope to direct runoff away from the roadway.

Permit requirements and specs also help manage existing driveways. Under the Winnebago County ordinance, any upgrade, even blacktopping, must conform. Unsafe changes, like piling rock



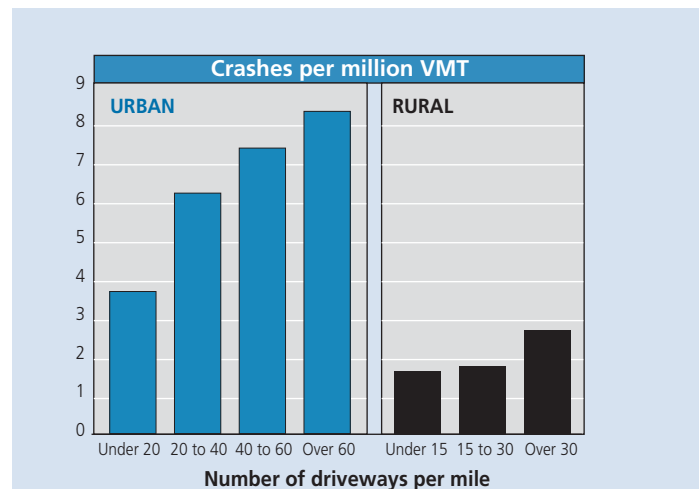
Drainage from an improperly constructed driveway can cause road damage.

around the culvert ends, are prohibited. If the landowner doesn't remove the hazard, the highway department will do it and bill the owner.

Political pressure can be a problem when a landowner is unhappy. The antidote is a comprehensive access ordinance

and strong, informed support from the elected officials.

"The ordinance puts the decision into the administrative staff's realm," says Haese. "It benefits the entire community instead of one or two individuals. After all, that's what government is all about."



Reduced roadway speeds

A research synthesis found that roadway speeds were reduced an average of 2.5 MPH for every 10 access points per mile, up to a maximum of a 10 MPH reduction (at 40 access points per mile), according to *Benefits of Access Management*, a brochure by the FHWA Office of Operations—Office of Travel Management.

http://ops.fhwa.dot.gov/access_mgmt/docs/benefits_am_trifold.htm

"People requesting a driveway permit often don't know what they really want or need."

Looking at current access ordinances used by other municipalities can help in preparing your own. For copies of county ordinances you can contact Winnebago County at: 920-232-1700 or St. Croix County Highway Department at 715-796-2227.

There is an ordinance example for towns with village powers online at: www.legis.state.wi.us/rsb/townlaw/townlaw_forms/66.0425%2086.07%20driveway.htm

Review the Town of Dunn ordinance at: <http://town.dunn.wi.us/Ordinances/13-05%20Driveway%20ordinance.pdf>