



National Association of
City Transportation Officials

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Senator Lee Beyer and Representative Caddy McKeown, Co-Chairs
Joint Committee on Transportation
900 Court Street, NE
Salem, OR 97301

Dear Co-Chairs Beyer and McKeown and Members of the Joint Committee:

The National Association of City Transportation Officials (NACTO) is writing to express support for local authority over speed limit setting on urban streets to be considered as part of the discussion of HB 2702. As cities around the country commit themselves to finally ending the nation's traffic crash epidemic, it is more important than ever that cities have the engineering and policy tools to make their streets safe for everyone – inside a car or out.

Cities face an urgent need to establish harmony between speed limits and street conditions, especially on multi-modal streets. Simply put, it is impossible to design most urban streets to be safe at high speeds. The National Committee on Uniform Traffic Control Devices, which advises the Federal Highway Administration on traffic standards, voted in January to recommend that speed limit studies account for the presence of people moving on the street on foot and on bike, as well as in motor vehicles, representing the increasingly mainstream view among U.S. transportation professionals that multi-modally sensitive speed limits are an essential part of traffic speed management and safety programs.

Yet those cities seeking to make their streets safe to walk, drive, bike, and take transit face a multitude of barriers at the state level. These include requirements for state approval of speed limit changes on uncategorized city-owned streets, an especially onerous process for cities as large as Portland, and the inability to set jurisdiction-wide default speed limits despite the evidence that such speed limits are easy for drivers to follow.

These barriers are based on longstanding but erroneous assumptions that drivers know which speed is safe under which conditions and the self-fulfilling prophecy that speed limits are immaterial to how fast drivers actually go. These assumptions have long been embedded in traffic engineering practice in the United States, and have had deadly results. The National Transportation Safety Board, an independent Federal agency tasked with investigating crash causes, found that speed-limit setting practices in the U.S. draw from studies conducted on rural roads, largely inapplicable to the multi-modal streets prevalent in Oregon's urban areas. Further, they found that relying on these practices results in a ratcheting up of speeds over time, contributing to negative safety outcomes.

Oregon took a positive step for safe streets in 2016 with the passage of HB 2682, granting the City of Portland authority to lower the default speed limit on residential, city-owned streets. Permitting local governments to set a lower citywide default speed limit would go even further towards ensuring the safety of streets in Oregon's cities.

Fortunately, nationwide best practices in state speed limit law and policy have emerged in recent years, with many states acting to provide cities with the tools they need to set safe speed limits. For

instance, Massachusetts law now allows all cities and towns to set citywide 25 mph speed limits and 20 mph “safety zones” that can cover large areas of the city. As of this writing, 34 municipalities have opted in, including Boston, Cambridge, and Somerville.¹ Washington State law permits cities to set default arterial speed limits of 25 mph, residential and business-district speed limits of 20 mph, and to lower or raise speed limits without an engineering study, allowing Seattle to lower speeds throughout the city.² New York State permits New York City to set citywide default speed limits as low as 25 mph, which the city did in 2014. In all these cases, the city may raise or lower speed limits on individual streets as needed, within the range of 15 to 50 mph depending on the state. While each state based their laws on previous practice, they arrived at similar conclusions: cities must have the right to set speed limits. Oregon is likewise poised to become a national leader.

These changes have been part of successful and sustained reductions in speeds and traffic fatalities. In Boston, the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety found that the number of vehicles being driven over 35 mph fell by 30 percent when the citywide speed limit was lowered from 30 mph to 25 mph. This study naturally included many streets that did not receive additional design or speed enforcement. New York City established 25 mph speed limits in 2014, soon after introducing automated speed enforcement. These changes enabled and complemented a wide array of traffic engineering changes, from signal timing to street design. Traffic fatalities in New York City have fallen by 30 percent since 2013, the city’s fifth consecutive year of improvement.³

Speed management is supported by, and coordinated by, safe speed limits. Cities, towns, and counties own the vast majority of street mileage in the United States, and make engineering and design decisions every day that affect those streets. Without consonance between the speed limit and the design or target speed of the street, drivers receive mixed messages: the posted speed limit is sometimes substantially faster than a safe speed.

The link between speed and risk on the street is among the best-documented and incontrovertible relationships in the fields of engineering and public health. Not only do higher vehicle speeds increase the likelihood of a crash occurring, they also increase – roughly quadrupling for every doubling in speed – the likelihood of death resulting from such a collision. For pedestrians in particular, low speeds are of the essence.

Legislative action is essential for local jurisdictions to set speed limits in accordance with the real conditions and safety needs of their streets. As co-chairs of the Joint Committee on Transportation, you are well-positioned to advance this common sense legislation to eliminate preventable deaths on streets across Oregon. We look forward to working together on this shared goal.

Sincerely,



Corinne Kisner
Executive Director, NACTO

¹ <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/speed-limits-in-thickly-settled-or-business-districts#municipalities-that-have-notified-massdot-of-opt-in->

² <https://app.leg.wa.gov/RCW/default.aspx?cite=46.61.415>

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/01/nyregion/traffic-deaths-decrease-nyc.html>