

Changes being made to assist drivers navigating the roads

Friday, May 25, 2007 11:05 AM CDT

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Struggling to read a pill bottle is one thing; trying to read a tiny street sign while zipping along is another.

But changes are being made to make it easier for seniors, and everybody else, to navigate roadways with larger traffic signs, wider, reflective pavement markers and brighter traffic signals.

And it's about time. Americans over the age of 65 are the fastest-growing population, and by 2020, more than 40 million licensed drivers age 65 and older will be on the road, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Aging eyes may have trouble detecting sharp curves, and seniors also want bigger, brighter traffic signals and more time to walk through crosswalks.

Making roadways safer for older drivers has been on the Illinois Department of Transportation agenda since 1990, when a group of IDOT retirees and nearly 200 senior volunteers drove the state, from interstates to narrow country roads. They got out of their cars and walked through intersections, reporting what they liked and didn't like. Although they liked interstate signage and markings, they thought upgrades were needed elsewhere, said IDOT spokesman Mike Claffey.

Eighty-two-year-old Gene Rudow of Bloomington agrees. He's been driving for 72 years, since he learned to pop a clutch on a tractor, and although his vision is good, he'd like to see turn lanes and curves stand out with brighter markings.

"When it's wet and toward dusk, those lanes are hard to see," he said. "I know them, but for a stranger in town it would be really hard to follow some of those lanes."

On his annual trip to Florida, he noticed lanes marked in fluorescent paint.

"There's no way you can miss those."

IDOT is switching out overhead signs on state roads with easier-to-read signs that can weather



Road signs are becoming easier to read with larger letters printed on highly reflective material. Jim Crowley shows an example of the standard 6-inch street sign (top), which is being replaced by a 9-inch sign. Letters increased from 4 to 6 inches. He's the sign shop crew leader for the City of Bloomington. (Pantagraph/STEVE SMEDLEY)

salt spray, humidity and temperature extremes.

"Many of these improvements benefit younger drivers as well," Claffey said, mentioning better-marked guard rails and message boards that spell out what's ahead.

The state also is phasing in raised reflective pavement markers along center lines and road edges to make those stand out. Traffic signals are being changed from incandescent to LED lighting.

Such changes are recommended in the Federal Highway Administration's "Highway Design Book for Older Drivers and Pedestrians," a guidebook for state transportation departments.

Municipalities are going by the book as well. Stop signs are being upsized in Bloomington, from 24 to 30 inches. Normal is changing over street name signs, using six-inch letters instead of four.

As new Bloomington traffic signals are installed, they'll use brighter LED bulbs, which can last 10 to 20 years, said Kevin Kothe, city design engineer. Traffic signals are bigger too. Gone are the eight-inch lenses, replaced by 12-inch lights.

Edge lines along major arteries, like Hershey Road, have been widened from four to six inches and instead of painting them, crews are gluing down a longer-lasting reflective tape. Along four-lane roads, such as Fort Jesse and Raab, slightly raised reflectors are used along the center line.

"Where it helps the most is night driving or wet-weather driving," said Mike Hall, Normal's director of public works. "You get that little glare off the pavement and you can't see."

Older pedestrians have trouble, too. Adult walkers over the age of 70 have the highest fatality rate of any pedestrians, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

Many walk more slowly than the 4-feet-per-second standard commonly used for timing walk signals. Slower walking speeds could be used to set traffic signal times. Those slower speeds are being used in school zones, Kothe said.

Some cities are using countdown walk lights, which flash the number of seconds remaining for a person to get across a street. Normal engineers are looking at the signals for the uptown area and around Illinois State University.

Older drivers also have difficulty making left turns, leading all other age groups in crashes at intersections when turning left. Bloomington usually adds left turn lanes during widening or upgrade projects, Kothe said. Bi-directional turn lanes, which provide a refuge for those waiting to turn from a two-lane street, also help.

Gail Holley heads up the "Safe Mobility for Life" program with the Florida Department of Transportation. About two years ago, department officials realized they needed to partner with local municipalities and seniors' groups to make roadways safer.

"One agency can't do it alone," she said.

"We made the changes on our roads but we have a lot of local roads that we don't have

jurisdiction over."

Along with working with local governments to figure out how they can help, "we're trying to really pound down the message that it's not the changes you do for the elder driver but for every driver."

And Hall said drivers also need to realize when their impairments or limited mobility make them unsafe.

"You still have to have the reaction time and the ability to see a pedestrian or something in the right of way. We do the best we can, but we can only take it so far."

Top 10 ways to make roads safer

Beginning at about age 55, we see a gradual decline in our ability to process information, remember and make judgments in traffic situations, such as distance and approach time of oncoming traffic. Reaction times for older drivers may be up to 30 percent greater than younger drivers. Eyesight starts to worsen at about age 40. By age 60 a driver needs three times more light to see than at age 16. Here are some roadway changes AAA Chicago recommends:

- Larger and simpler road signs in highly reflective material
- Crosswalks with reflective pavement markings and countdown signals to help pedestrians know if they have enough time to cross; refuge medians in wide streets
- Left turn lanes with an arrow traffic signal
- Larger stop signs
- Better lighting on both highways and city streets
- Brighter pavement markings so drivers can see curbs, lanes and intersections/crosswalks more easily
- Larger traffic signal heads and longer periods when traffic from all directions have a red light so traffic can clear
- Large and clear signs well ahead of entrance and exit ramps on highways
- Clearly marked work zones
- Changeable message signs to inform drivers of delays, construction and other changes ahead

SOURCE: Beth Mosher, AAA Chicago

Older drivers pose high risks

Although senior drivers are often safe drivers, being more likely to wear their seatbelt, less likely to drink and drive and less likely to speed, they're also more at risk of injury and death from a crash. Here are some other statistics from Beth Mosher, AAA Chicago spokeswoman:

- Per 100,000 miles driven, older drivers die in traffic crashes at higher rates than any other age group except teen males. Older drivers also are more likely to suffer severe injuries.
- Fatal crash rates rise sharply at age 70 and older, according to the Federal Highway Administration.
- 40 percent of fatal collisions of people age 70 and older occur at intersections and involve other vehicles, according to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety.
- Senior drivers make up 13 percent of all traffic fatalities; 12 percent of vehicle occupant fatalities and 18 percent of pedestrian fatalities.

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