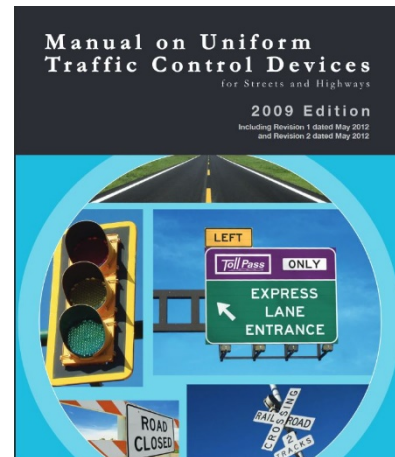


MUTCD – Throw Away Good Signs?

When a major revision to the Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices (MUTCD), such as the 2009 Edition, is published, there is often an outcry that the changes will require immediate changes to signs and other traffic control devices, even though the existing devices are still in good service. With few exceptions, this is not true.

For example, following the 2009 Edition enactment, the mayor of one of America’s largest cities carried on extensively that the new Manual would require his city to remove perfectly good street name signs to replace capital letters with lower case letters. Respectfully, the mayor was either ill-informed or was being deliberately theatrical.



But to be fair, many agencies were worried that they would incur significant and immediate costs to come into immediate compliance with new sign types, larger signs, wider pavement markings, and other different standards. While there are some exceptions where compliance is scheduled within, say two years, five years, etc., the Manual mostly requires that compliance be achieved at the time the traffic control device is replaced (e.g., when it is damaged, stolen, or reaches the end of its service life). This is often called “programmatically replacement” and it provides for an orderly transition over time to deploy devices that we have learned through research provide greater safety for the traveling public.

Let’s look closely at the MUTCD language for a better understanding (emphasis added).

“After the effective date of a new edition of the MUTCD or a revision thereto, or after the adoption thereof by the State, whichever occurs later, new or reconstructed devices installed shall be in compliance with the new edition or revision.

“Unless a particular device is no longer serviceable, non-compliant devices on existing highways and bikeways shall be brought into compliance with the current edition of the National MUTCD as part of the systematic upgrading of substandard traffic control devices (and installation of new required traffic control devices) required pursuant to the Highway Safety Program, 23 U.S.C. §402(a). The FHWA has the authority to establish other target compliance dates for implementation of particular changes to the MUTCD [23 CFR 655.603(d)(1)]. These target compliance dates established by the FHWA shall be as shown in Table I-2.

“Except as provided in Paragraph 24, when a non-compliant traffic control device is being replaced or refurbished because it is damaged, missing, or no longer serviceable for any reason, it shall be replaced with a compliant device.”¹

To recap, new or reconstructed traffic control devices must be in compliance with the latest version of the MUTCD, but existing devices can generally be left in place until it is time to replace or reconstruct them. In specific cases the Federal Highway Administration establishes deadlines for compliance and those are summarized in a table in the Manual’s Introduction.

¹ Delaware MUTCD, Introduction, ¶20-23

Another exception involves Federal-aid projects, where the devices in the project corridor will typically be brought into full compliance. *“In cases involving Federal-aid projects for new highway or bikeway construction or reconstruction, the traffic control devices installed (temporary or permanent) shall be in conformance with the most recent edition of the National MUTCD before that highway is opened or re-opened to the public for unrestricted travel [23 CFR 655.603(d)(2) and (d)(3)].”*²

A final option allows a non-compliant device to be replaced in kind:

“(DE Revision) A damaged, missing, or otherwise non-serviceable device that is non-compliant may be replaced in kind if engineering judgment³ indicates that:

A. One compliant device in the midst of a series of adjacent non-compliant devices would be confusing to road users; and/or

B. The schedule for replacement of the whole series of non-compliant devices will result in achieving timely compliance with the MUTCD.

*C. The conversion to a compliant device would result in a significant delay in the installation of a safety-critical traffic control device (for instance, due to cost, engineering, environmental approval, etc).”*⁴

So when the next version of the MUTCD is published, take a deep breath and rest assured that, with a few likely exceptions, your agency will have time to prepare for the changes and ease into them over time.

The Delaware T²/LTAP Center’s Municipal Engineering Circuit Rider is intended to provide technical assistance and training to local agencies, so if you have MUTCD questions or other transportation issues, contact Matt Carter at matheu@udel.edu or (302) 831-7236.

² Delaware MUTCD, Introduction, ¶121

³ Engineering judgement will be explained further in another technical brief, but suffice it to say that it does require the decision be made by a Professional Engineer licensed in the State of Delaware and requires some data collection, observation, and analysis specific to the location in question.

⁴ Delaware MUTCD, Introduction, ¶124