



75 mph speed limits win final approval, head to Snyder

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Lansing — Michigan is poised to increase speed limits to 75 miles per hour on some rural freeways within the next year under legislation en route to the desk of Gov. Rick Snyder for signature.

The proposal, which won final approval Tuesday in the state House, directs Department of Transportation officials and state police to raise 70 mph speed limits on at least 600 miles of limited access freeway if they conclude that safety and engineering studies warrant the change.

The five-bill package also seeks to raise speed limits to 65 mph on at least 900 miles of state trunk line highway in the next year. The main measure passed the Republican-led House in a narrow 57-51 vote after getting 28-8 approval last week in the Senate.

Supporters say the legislation may boost highway safety by leading motorists to travel at more uniform rates. But critics argue faster speed limits could lead to more violent crashes and fatalities.

"I don't think we should allow people to go faster on the roads until we actually fix the roads," said Rep. Jon Hoadley, D-Kalamazoo, who referenced ongoing quality concerns after voting against the measure.

The proposal seeks to codify the engineering principle that speed limits should be set to match the speed at which 85 percent of drivers already travel on a given roadway in ideal conditions.

Doing so would allow the state to "properly reflect the way people drive on our highways using scientific methods to set speed limits instead of emotions," said sponsoring Rep. Bradford Jacobsen, R-Oxford Township.

The average motorist already travels about 78 mph on Michigan freeways, said Jacobsen, who suggested that raising limits will not necessarily increase actual speeds.

“If it’s a dry, open road north of Mount Pleasant on a Sunday afternoon, it doesn’t matter if you post it at 45 mph or 80 mph, people are going to drive the speed they feel safe,” he said.

[Steven Gursten](#), an attorney who heads up Michigan Auto Law, has fought the legislation since its introduction and argues that speed kills.

“As an auto accident lawyer, I know there’s almost an epidemic of distracted driving, with people texting and driving,” he told The Detroit News last week. “Now what we’re doing is taking away that safety cushion.”

Gursten pointed to a [1990 study](#) by a University of Michigan researcher showing fatal crashes increased nearly 20 percent when the state raised its rural highway speed limits from 55 mph to 65 mph in 1987.

A more [recent evaluation](#) conducted for the state Department of Transportation concluded that

raising non-freeway speed limits from 55 mph to 65 mph hour “is expected to increase fatal crashes, which contradicts Michigan’s ‘Towards Zero Deaths’ initiative.”

But “research has generally demonstrated that modifications of the posted speed limit result in changes in the observed mean and 85th percentile speeds that are less pronounced than the actual speed limit modifications,” said the report by Wayne State University Professor Timothy Gates.

The report identified hundreds of rural freeway and highway miles that could be candidates for higher speed limits, but the state Department of Transportation “will still need to develop a formalized process for final recommendations,” a spokesman said last week.

Likely candidates include Interstate 75 in northern Michigan, the freeway portion of U.S. 131 that begins in north Kent County and runs toward Manton, and U.S. 127 from near Clare to where it connects with I-75 in Crawford County.

The package approved Tuesday would also set speed limit rules for rural gravel roads and generally require local communities to keep speed limits consistent with safety and engineering studies.