

Older Drivers and Roadway Safety in California

The Challenge: Designing Roadways to Accommodate the Needs of Older Drivers

- Nationwide, the percentage of persons age 65 and older who are licensed drivers has increased from 61% in 1980 to 72% in 1990 and 80% in 2003.
- In 2003, about 1 in 7 licensed drivers was 65 or older. By 2020, people in this age group will represent 1 in every 5 licensed drivers, and the proportion is expected to increase to 1 in 4 by 2030.
- While older individuals tend to be relatively safe drivers, with lower crash rates per licensed driver than younger age groups, data indicate clearly that older drivers are at significantly higher risk of being injured or killed when crashes do occur. Compared with a fatality rate of 2.0 per 1,000 crashes for all age groups combined, person ages 65-74 have a fatality rate of 3.2. The rate climbs to 5.3 for those ages 75-84, and at 85 and above, the rate is 8.6.
- Studies show that naturally occurring physiological changes may make driving more difficult as people age. For instance, older drivers generally need more light to see roadway hazards as well as safety devices, and they often react more slowly than do younger drivers.
- In California, 10.6% of the population was 65 or older in 2000. By 2010, that age group is expected to grow to 11.5% of our state's population, and by 2030, the U.S. Census Bureau says senior citizens will constitute 17.8% of California's population.

The Solution: Relatively Low-Cost Improvements Can Make Roads Safer for Older Drivers

- The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) has published "Guidelines and Recommendations to Accommodate Older Drivers and Pedestrians," a series of research-based recommendations for roadway improvements to help older individuals continue driving safely for a longer time.
- The FHWA recommendations include low-cost improvements — such as larger and more reflective signs, offset left-turn lanes and reflective turn path pavement markings, advance warning of upcoming traffic signals, reflective posts and delineators, reflective backplates on traffic signals, etc. — at intersections, interchanges, curves, construction work zones, and highway-rail grade crossings.
- California has developed its own comprehensive plan to improve highway safety, including strategies to improve safety for older drivers.

Funding is Available to Finance These Needed Roadway Safety Improvements

- In 2005, Congress created the Highway Safety Improvement Program (HSIP) to help state and local governments finance a wide variety of roadway safety projects, including all of the types of improvements recommended by FHWA to accommodate older drivers.
- The Highway Safety Improvement Program is funded at over \$1 billion per year for five years.
- On average over five years, California's annual share of HSIP funding is nearly \$90 million.
- In addition, each state receives a share of other federal highway funds (e.g., Surface Transportation Program funds and High Risk Rural Road funds) that could be used for roadway safety projects to accommodate older drivers.
- Also, motorists in California pay a state tax on motor fuel that is used to finance road construction, maintenance, operational and safety improvements on highways across the state. State highway funds could be another revenue source for projects designed to meet the needs of our growing population of older drivers.