



Janet T. Mills
 GOVERNOR

Bruce A. Van Note
 COMMISSIONER

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Originators: Stephen Landry	Issue Date: 11/18/24
Approved By: Joyce Taylor	

Speed Limit and Context

MaineDOT is migrating to a speed setting protocol based on context road classification. Roadway context is a term that classifies roads based on land-use and how that impacts how different roadway users as the travel along the road. It uses context to determine how ALL roadway users are considered under certain contexts. MaineDOT is proposing to classify context in five categories: 1) Rural, 2) Rural Town, 3) Village, 4) Suburban, and 5) Urban. The context classification designates the criteria that will be used for setting speeds in each of the context groups.

MaineDOT has created a statewide context classification map to assure consistent treatment of roadways between regions and within context-focused processes. Contexts were assigned based on criteria such as building density and setbacks with some manual smoothing to account for unique edge cases. The maps are based solely on existing context and are not meant to be aspirational context.

What is the map?

The map was created by MaineDOT engineers, planners, and designers based on guidance from NCHRP 966 research. The map is created by looking at existing land use, density of buildings, building setbacks, presence, of sidewalks (etc.). The map is intended to give us a broad overview of the 5 different classifications on Maine DOT Roads: Rural, Rural Town, Village, Suburban, Urban.

Where is the map located?

<https://maine.maps.arcgis.com/apps/mapviewer/index.html?webmap=160bf270af1d44559d04a8a6292b7854&extent=-70.3379,44.0432,-70.0907,44.1443>

How do we use the map?

The map is intended to inform legislators, municipal officials, traffic engineers, designers, and the general public about the different contexts of MaineDOT Roads and to aid in engineering activities such as setting speed limits, designing roadway treatments, project scoping, implementation of MaineDOT's Complete Streets Policy, and traffic calming.

Why is it important that MaineDOT is setting speed limits based on roadway context?

Context is important for two reasons:

- Roads with the same context typically have similar visual environments for drivers. Speed limit guidance from Safe System Approach resources advise that speed limits are set based on road environment and function to align them with driver expectations. This is critical to achieving a system of self-explaining roads, where drivers naturally travel at safe speeds without overreliance on speed enforcement.
- The roadway context classifications which have been mapped represent the density and type development present both for the individual roadway and for the immediate surrounding area. These factors correlate strongly to the likelihood of pedestrians and bicyclists using the roadway. This is important information, both for safety and accessibility considerations. This knowledge allows engineers and planners to adapt transportation decisions based on roadway context and make improvements where necessary. When drivers are traveling at unsafe speeds for a context zone, speed management and traffic calming measures can be used to make appropriate adjustments. Additionally, when highway and bridge projects occur in developed, non-rural context zones, the project will be scoped to include any necessary speed management or complete streets infrastructure changes.

What does this mean for roadway functional classifications?

This does not impact roadway functional classification. Functional classifications such as arterial, collectors, local roads, etc., are still applicable. Context may be influenced by function, but it is a distinct classification. MaineDOT's speed limit procedure uses both roadway context and function together to determine the speed.

How does a municipality request a change to the map? (when will MaineDOT consider a change)

First, MaineDOT will only accept a request for a change of context from a municipality. Second the municipality would need to present their case on why the context classification is incorrect. What did we miss? What did we not consider? A MaineDOT review committee will convene and discuss the merits of the request?

The map was made with automated criteria that were set and refined to pick up the areas. Although the data-focused analysis created a map that represents the classifications well, there may be areas that were missed, or classified incorrectly. The Context Review Committee (described below), at the request of a municipality, will review small areas to determine if they have been misclassified. Examples of areas that may have been misclassified are parks that look like rural fields, schools that look like big box stores, major pedestrian destinations just outside of a developed context, or one-way roads (divided or not) that are evaluated in the same way as two-way roads.

Will Traffic Movement Permits (TMP's) flag a change in the context?

There will be locations where future development may cause an area to be redefined. For instance, a rural area may be built up and become a large subdivision, or a former factory may change land

use into housing. MaineDOT intends for the roadway classification to change with the surrounding uses. These areas may be reevaluated through the Traffic permit process.

Who does the public/municipalities/etc. contact to request changes?

Municipalities can contact their local Regional Traffic Engineer (RTE), or their local MaineDOT Regional Planner to request a change. Public requests should be submitted through the appropriate Municipality.

How will the Region Traffic Engineers (RTEs) use the map? –

The RTE's will use this map to set speed limits, using the MaineDOT modified speed limit setting tool, (add a link or reference). They will also be responsible for proposing traffic calming measures in areas where the speed limit tool suggests a much lower speed limit than vehicles are currently driving, with the help of this committee.

MaineDOT has determined that a roadway doesn't have the context to post a lower speed limit, how does a municipality achieve the context needed to get people to slow down?

MaineDOT has posted a series of documentation and guidelines on how to modify a roadways context. In order for a lower speed limit to be posted, the contextual elements of the roadway will need to promote lower speeds and provide proper contextual cues for a lower speed in the area that better serves all road users.

Who is on the Context Review Committee in charge of reviewing issues with the map?

Chief Engineer
State Traffic Engineer
Assistant State Traffic Engineer
Highway Safety Engineer
Region Traffic Engineer
Regional Planner
Active Transportation Coordinator

The review committee will require quorum of at least four members to render a decision. This committee will review each section to determine if the context of the section of the road needs to be changed.

How does a municipality contest a context decision made by the MaineDOT committee?

A municipality has the ability to contest a context decision made by MaineDOT through our Reconsideration Process shown below..

How does a municipality contest a speed limit set by the Department?

A municipality has the ability to contest a speed limit posting decision made by MaineDOT through our Reconsideration Process shown below.

Reconsideration Process

Any municipality that takes umbrage with a context or speed limit posting decision may request Reconsideration of the context decision by the Department but must do so in writing by August 31, 2025. MaineDOT will not reassess context again until the summer of 2030. Reconsideration of the speed limit posting must be requested within 30 days of the speed limit posting on the roadway.

The request for reconsideration must set forth the findings and conclusions of the Department to which the municipality objects, the basis of those objections, the nature of the relief requested, and whether a hearing is requested. If requested and the review group determines a hearing is warranted, a hearing will be held ordinarily within 30 business days of receiving the reconsideration request, unless MaineDOT requests additional information regarding the reconsideration, at which point, the timeline for reconsideration restarts.

The review group will issue a written decision, ordinarily within 30 business days of receiving the reconsideration request or, if a hearing is held, within 30 business days from the close of the hearing. The decision will set forth the review committee's reasons for either affirming or modifying the original decision.

The running of the time for appeal for context reconsideration and the *Administrative Procedure Act* is tolled by a timely request for reconsideration filed under this section. The full time for appeal commences and is computed from the date of the final Department action addressing the request for reconsideration. The filing of a request for reconsideration, however, is an administrative prerequisite for the filing of an appeal.