

Congress of the United States

November 22, 2024

The Honorable Gene L. Dodaro
Comptroller General
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G St., NW
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Comptroller General Dodaro,

We are experiencing an unconscionable safety crisis in this country. More than 35,000 people die on our roadways every year. More than 7,000 pedestrians were struck and killed in 2022, the highest number since 1981. No comparable nation sees this kind of death toll. Some, using the “Vision Zero” safety framework, have actually reduced pedestrian deaths to zero. We know that the design of our roads plays a major role in driving this trend. Streets that are designed to allow drivers to speed will result in speeding drivers. Roads with pedestrian crosswalks spread over a mile apart will result in unprotected pedestrians.

The federal Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices (MUTCD or Manual) has a significant influence on safety standards nationally. While the MUTCD is not a roadway design guide, it does include a number of provisions regarding the implementation of bike lanes, pedestrian crossings, bus lanes, and other multimodal facilities. Some experts have concluded that the MUTCD’s provisions restrict the use of street designs that would prioritize the movement of vulnerable road users. The National Association of City Transportation Officials has asserted that the MUTCD “has played an outsized role in the unsafe design of our streets” by prioritizing the “fast-flowing movement of cars” over other users’ safety.

While the MUTCD permits engineering discretion that should allow practitioners to exercise their own judgement about the best way to implement roadway safety, Our offices have heard from engineers across the country that the structure and language of the MUTCD, as well as the industry culture around it, results in a reluctance to deviate from the guidelines even when alternatives may be more contextually appropriate.

To assist us with understand the impact of the MUTCD on engineering decisions and implementation of multi-modal road designs, We request that GAO conduct a study on the use of the MUTCD by State and local government traffic engineers, planners, and consultants. Specifically, we request that you examine:

1. How do practitioners view and use the MUTCD as they develop road designs?
2. To what extent do practitioners exercise engineering discretion to deviate from MUTCD to increase safety for vulnerable road users or improve multimodal access?
3. For what types of facilities, projects, and contexts do practitioners most frequently report seeking discretion to deviate from MUTCD?
4. What challenges, if any, do practitioners face when exercising engineering discretion to increase safety for vulnerable road users or improve multimodal access, and what are the effects of any challenges on a project’s budget or schedule?

Congress of the United States

Thank you for your attention to this request. If you have any questions, please contact Madeleine Marr (madeleine_marr@fetterman.senate.gov) or Jackie Schmitz (jackie.schmitz@mail.house.gov).

Sincerely,



Rick Larsen
Ranking Member
Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure



John Fetterman
United States Senator