

Flashing Beacons

Description:

Flashing beacons (sometimes called flashers or flashing lights) are frequently requested in the belief that they will slow down traffic. However, the real purpose of flashers is to attract attention to unexpected hazards. The following discussion of flashing beacons is offered to clarify the real effects of flashers, and what must be considered before flashers are installed.

What are the “right” conditions for flashing lights?

A flashing beacon is most effective as a warning of unexpected or hazardous conditions not readily visible to motorists. One of the more common locations where a flashing beacon is effective is on the approach to a stop sign or traffic signal beyond a curve, that is hidden from the view of approaching motorists.

Are there situations where a flashing beacon should not be used?

Immediately after seeing a flasher, drivers must consistently see an unusual condition that requires special attention. The conditions also must be viewed as serious enough to justify having been alerted. For any traffic control device to be effective it must command the respect of motorists. If it seems arbitrary or unnecessary, drivers tend to ignore it.



Traffic Engineering
Department

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When are there problems associated with the installation of unnecessary flashing beacons?

When flashing beacons are used where not warranted they lose much of their effectiveness. After continually being alerted to a condition that does not appear to be truly unusual, research and experience has shown that drivers actually stop "seeing" a flashing light. This can result in a disregard for all beacons, even those that are truly needed.

If I think there is a problem and a flashing beacon isn't the answer, what should I do?

Contact the City Traffic Division. Ask the transportation engineers to look into the situation. Ask them about other forms of traffic control that might apply. When requesting a flashing beacon, don't be surprised if the transportation engineer seems skeptical or difficult to convince, it's for a good reason: it is essential to determine that there is a problem which can be solved by a flasher before one should be installed. It is important that flashing beacons be kept to a minimum if a high degree of respect is to be maintained for flashers that are truly needed.



I have seen some crosswalks with flashing lights in the pavement. What is this for?

These crosswalks are outfitted with pedestrian actuated in-roadway lights (and flashing beacons) to draw attention to the pedestrians crossing in an effort to remind vehicles to stop for them. The crosswalks chosen for these devices have frequent pedestrian activity with opposing vehicle traffic and are located at either an uncontrolled intersection or midblock.

There are buttons (located on a pole adjacent to the crosswalk) that a pedestrian can push to activate these lights prior to using the crosswalk. Once pushed the in-roadway lights and flashing beacons are activated to warn road users that they are approaching a condition that might require the road users to slow down and/or come to a stop. The activation of the lights does not guarantee that a vehicle will yield to pedestrians in the crosswalk. For this reason we always recommend that pedestrians cross defensively.

It is important to note that because these lights are turned on only when a pedestrian has pushed the button, it reinforces the importance of the flashing beacons to drivers as they will see the pedestrians crossing.

If you need further information please call the Traffic Engineering Department at:

925-931-5650