

Mailbox Safety

There are 30 to 35 million rural and suburban mailboxes in this country. These mailboxes must accommodate both the owner and the mail carrier. However, safety considerations are often overlooked. This bulletin describes improper and unsafe mailbox installation and discusses proper installation and placement. At the end is a list of points to be covered in a local mailbox ordinance.

Although crash reports related to mailboxes are sketchy, the limited data available suggests that 70 to 100 highway deaths in the U.S. each year could be attributed to mailboxes. This data relates the construction of the mailbox system, and especially its support, to the severity of the accident.

The Department of Transportation Division of Highways surveyed mailbox-related crashes in Wisconsin. In 1987 alone, there were over 1700 crashes involving mailboxes that resulted in 144 injuries and two deaths.

Improper support systems, such as milk canisters or barrels filled with concrete, were most significant in crashes where there were injuries. Improper placement was most significant in non-injury crashes.

Weak attachments between box and post are another hazard. These may permit the box to penetrate the car's passenger compartment. Multiple mailboxes on a single support, or placed too close together, can also be hazards.

Hazardous Mailbox Installations

Most curb or roadside mailboxes are relatively simple and unlikely to pose a serious crash threat to vehicles. These are relatively lightly constructed on supports which will easily break off, posing little harm to the vehicle. What threat they may pose is from the box parting from the post and entering the passenger compartment.

The U.S. Postal Service has some requirements for the mailbox and its height, but does not regulate installation. It approves only certain types of boxes and requires that they be installed with the box bottom 42 inches to 48 inches above the ground. Local postal representatives will review the box location for carrier access and safety and will make verbal recommendations. They have not become involved in structure and installation of the box. Thus the nation's highways are lined with multitudes of installations, some of which are highly hazardous obstacles.

It is the heavy, ornamental or multiple installations that can be lethal roadside obstacles. Masonry installations, large receptacles filled with sand or concrete, metal posts larger than 1 1/2 inches inside diameter, and wood posts larger than a nominal 4 inches square or 4 inches diameter, are a hazard. Such ornamental mailboxes as old plows, wagon wheels, and comic installations such as "air mail delivery" (a non-functional box on an extra high post) are hazards or obstacles. More than two boxes mounted on a single support, or installed too close together, can be hazardous even if supports are lightweight.

Crash tests show that when more than two mailboxes are mounted together, some of the boxes can penetrate the passenger compartment. The use of a plank to mount several mailboxes is especially hazardous.

Guidelines for Safe Installation

It is best to keep the entire mailbox installation as light weight as possible. This permits a vehicle crashing into it to break off the mailbox with less damage to the vehicle. The heavier the installation, the less likely it will move instantaneously, causing more damage to the vehicle and injury to its occupants.

For safer mailboxes, follow four basic guidelines:

- Use support posts which will easily break off or move out of the way.
- Mount no more than two mailboxes on one support post.
- Attach the mailbox firmly to the support post using adequately strong bolts and plates.
- Consider roadside conditions in selecting a site.

Supports

- The Postal Service requires that the bottom of the box be 42 to 48 inches above ground level. The following are recommended standards for supports which ensure that they will break away on impact.
- Pipes should be 1-1/2 inch inside diameter or less.
- Square wood supports should not be larger than 4 inches by 4 inches nominal.
- Round wood posts should not be larger than 4 inches in diameter.
- Metal channel posts should not weigh more than 2 pounds per foot.
- Imbed supports no more than 24 inches into the ground and do not imbed them in concrete.
- Do not use anchor plates with metal posts. Anti-twist flanges are acceptable as long as they do not project more than 10 inches into the ground. These should be attached to the metal post or pipe with 2-3/8 inch (nominal) muffler clamps. The Federal Highway Administration has published Accepted Safety Hardware. For more information contact the State Division Office of the Federal Highway Administration.

Summary

Local government should encourage safety on the highways it maintains. This includes concern for safe mailbox installations. Local officials may work with property owners and the postal service to develop safe mailbox installations. Property owners should be encouraged to remove unsafe installations. Providing examples of proper installation guidelines can go a long way in promoting safety.

It is vitally important to understand that mailboxes can be obstacles along any roadway. The Wisconsin Department of Transportation has established standards that mailbox supports must adhere to, based on requirements in the Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices (MUTCD). These standards apply not only immediately along the travel way, but also in adjacent clear zones, areas which must be clear of obstacles for vehicle safety.

The ASHTO manual, A Guide for Erecting Mailboxes on Highways, can be used for implementing the standards and applications in the MUTCD. This includes suggestions for post sizes for different installation types. The Wisconsin D.O.T. has an informational pamphlet for homeowners and detailed installation information.

The Federal Highway Administration is taking an active role in pressing for the application of recommended guidelines for new and replacement installations. In Wisconsin the D.O. T. will be taking a lead role in advising counties of their responsibilities in mailbox installation, relocation, and reinstallation on Federal Aid projects as they come up.

Dear Rusk County Resident,

This example of a swinging mailbox is only one example, there are other types that are manufactured. I found this one on the internet. You may wish to consult with your local hardware store. I strongly urge everyone to go to a swinging mailbox setup to help avoid snowplow/mailbox issues. Also please refer to the Mailbox Installation Guideline handout as well. It gives the proper dimension for mailbox installations i.e. height, setback from shoulder, and box sizes. If you have any questions please feel free to call the Highway office. Thank you for your time and patience in dealing with mailbox issues.

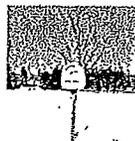
Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Phillip Montwill". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned below the word "Sincerely,".

Phil Montwill

Patrol Supt.

Rusk County Hwy. Dept.



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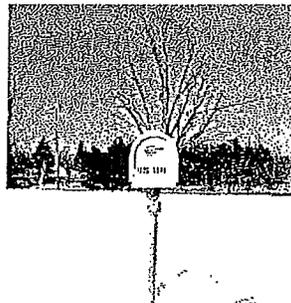
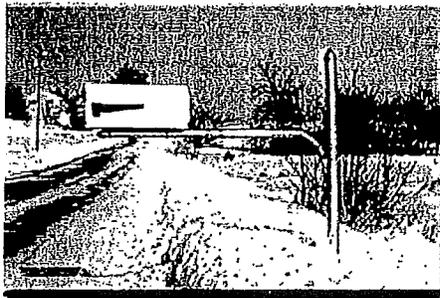
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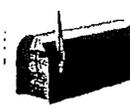
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