

Why do you want to cut down those beautiful trees along the roadside?

County Engineers really do like the environment and the beauty of those trees. However, they've seen the bits and pieces of cars that ran off the road and hit a hard object, or rolled several times. They are aware of the pain and suffering of the people in those cars as well as their families. Not only do they not like that, but they have a responsibility to try to prevent it.

Most of the public knows what happens when a car runs off the road. But many times they are still asked the question "Why do you have to build such wide roads and clear all the trees away from the edge of the road?"

Obviously we've not always been clear the reason for a "Roadside Clear Zone". It is defined by the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials as the unobstructed, relatively flat area provided beyond the edge of the traveled way for the recovery of errant vehicles. Many jurisdictions have developed their own Clear Zone design standards, based on AASHTO guidance. Others have adopted another agency's standards, usually the Washington State DOT's. The idea is to provide a safe facility and to limit tort liability.

Most drivers haven't had the trauma of leaving the roadway without enough recovery area. So it's hard for them to understand the severe hazards lurking off the edge. They are not always convinced that the tree, rock outcropping, or drop-off can't at least be fixed. The question is "Why can't you put in a safety barrier to preserve our quaint little rural road?" They may not think about whether there is room, or what kind of problem the barrier itself may cause.

It sometimes helps to describe other dangers that most drivers have come across. Many of these can be reduced or corrected with a proper Clear Zone. Talking about situations drivers have seen often helps explain the need and benefits of Clear Zones and why design standards are developed.

For example, removing some road side trees lets more sunlight in to melt the frost and ice from the slick driving surface. It also gives you a quicker look at that cute deer bounding across in front of the vehicle, much like the neighbor's dog darting from between parked cars in an urban setting.

If you have more questions about Clear Zones and safety problems, ask your County Engineer. They are always willing to try to help solve problems. Drive safe and remember why those trees were cut, others will be growing!

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Questions about this article, or any of the series, or on other topics related to County Roads, may be directed either to your County Engineer, or to Al King, P.E., County Road Administration Board, Olympia, at Al@CRAB.Wa.Gov.