

April 30, 1996

PEDESTRIAN PHASING

Of all of the various types of signal phasing encountered by the public, pedestrian phasing is probably the most misunderstood. Those of us who work in the traffic field know the meaning of the WALK, flashing DON'T WALK, and solid DON'T WALK indications, however, many ordinary citizens do not. They do not understand that:

- 1.) The display of the white WALK indication (or, using international symbols, the white pedestrian figure) means that you may begin crossing the intersection;
- 2.) The display of the flashing orange DON'T WALK indication (or, using international symbols, the flashing orange hand) means that you should no longer begin crossing but, if you have already entered the street, that you may finish crossing; and
- 3.) The display of the solid orange DON'T WALK indication (or, using international symbols, the solid orange hand) means that a conflicting vehicle movement is about to receive the green indication and that you should promptly finish crossing the street.

There are a number of reasons for this high degree of misunderstanding. The first is that, back in the 1960's, pedestrian indications in many states did not function in this manner. There was no flashing DON'T WALK interval and the WALK indication remained active throughout the entire crossing period, encompassing what is now both the WALK and the flashing DON'T WALK periods. This resulted in the display of the WALK indication for a much longer period of time than the 4 to 7 seconds currently recommended by the MUTCD (Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices).

Many older individuals still remember this type of operation and are confused when they see a short walk interval. They expect the WALK interval to remain on during the entire time that they are crossing the intersection and sometimes panic when the flashing DON'T WALK begins after they have only gone a few feet. Because they do not understand its meaning, it is not uncommon to see older individuals begin scurrying across the intersection when the flashing DON'T WALK begins or, in some instances, turn around and go back.

Another factor that contributed to this misunderstanding was that, back in the 1970's, some states used a flashing WALK indication instead of a solid WALK indication to alert pedestrians when the possibility existed that a turning vehicle might cross their path. It is easy to see how individuals from these states could become somewhat confused as to what flashing pedestrian indications really mean.

Finally, immigrants and international visitors are not familiar with the pedestrian indications used in the United States. In fact, from an international standpoint, the US system is fairly unique. Most modern countries outside the US use a solid green figure of a pedestrian to indicate WALK and a solid red pedestrian figure to indicate DON'T WALK. The solid green figure is flashed to warn the pedestrian that the crossing time is about to end and that a conflicting vehicle movement is about to begin. It is curious to note that, what we call international symbols here in the US - the white pedestrian figure and the orange hand - are not used by most members of the international community! Canada is the notable exception.

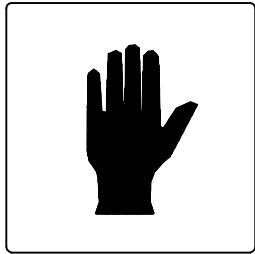
The end result of this variation in pedestrian interval operation is that many individuals, especially older individuals, become frustrated with the pedestrian crossing system and vent their frustrations by calling their local elected official to complain. The political pressure exerted by these individuals causes some agencies to increase their WALK times to inappropriately high levels in order to stop the complaints. These long WALK times usually result in an unnecessary increase in vehicular delay and, if they are too long, can cause problems with coordinated timing plans.

Instead of indiscriminately increasing WALK times, which not only increases vehicular delay but also further obscures the true meaning of the WALK indication, a better solution is to educate the citizenry on the meaning of modern pedestrian indications. This can be done through educational campaigns directed at schools and senior centers or by including questions on pedestrian operation in the driver's license examination. Detailed pedestrian signs, such as the one shown in Figure 1, are another means of educating the populace on the meaning of the various pedestrian intervals.



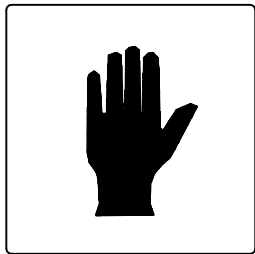
STEADY

START CROSSING
WATCH FOR
TURNING CARS



FLASHING

DO NOT START
FINISH CROSSING
IF STARTED



STEADY

DO NOT
ENTER
CROSSWALK