

Here's the problem

It's January 10, there's 10 inches of snow on the ground, 30 inches of snow piled up by your mailbox, and your mailbox is 10 feet away from its post. . .knocked down again by that doggone snowplow for the fourth time this winter.

Next spring, you decide, you'll plant that mailbox on a really sturdy post that no snowplow can affect! How about a nice cement-filled milk can like your neighbor across the way? Or a wire cage filled with large rocks and a post supported in the middle?

But wait, that may not be a good idea. . . . Sign posts along the edge of state highways must meet required DOT highway standards, which over the years have been extended to areas adjacent to the traveled way. Mailbox posts should also meet these sign standards.

A hazard is anything that can cause damage or injury if struck by an errant vehicle. A mailbox and its support can damage a vehicle that strikes it, but light-weight supports will cause a minimum of damage and are not considered a "hazard" under this definition.

This is not so with some of the more massive mailbox supports such as plowshares, concrete pillars or stone aggregate held together by a wire cage you might find placed along Wisconsin roads. If hit, these can cause extensive damage to a car, bike or motorcycle, not to mention the occupants and operators of said vehicles. Also, if the vehicle rides up on a massive support, the driver could lose control of the car. This can throw the car back into the path of other vehicles or cause it to turn over.

Finally, if a series of mailboxes mounted improperly on a horizontal plank is struck by a careening vehicle, the whole assembly could come apart. The loose plank could be thrust through the passenger compartment--spearing the occupants.

Here are the statistics

In 1987 there were 1,725 accidents involving mailboxes in Wisconsin. Injuries resulted from 144 of these accidents, and there were 2 fatalities.

This could have serious repercussions for a homeowner. In a legal sense, a mailbox that is a hazard and fails to meet U.S. Post Office mailbox

regulations and specifications may constitute a nuisance. The owner of such a mailbox may be liable to others for personal injury or property damage resulting from the hazard.

Here are the standards

According to the Division of Highways and Transportation Services at the Transportation Department, there are several alternative methods for installing single or multiple mailboxes:

Single mailboxes. An acceptable support for a mailbox includes wood posts 4" x 4" square or 4.5" in diameter. Soft metal conduits which are 1.5" to 2.5" in diameter are also acceptable. These supports should be embedded no more than 24" into the ground.

There are additional support systems which allow the mailbox to swing if struck.

On either of these two types of supports, one or two mailboxes may be mounted.

Multiple mailbox installations. Multiple mailbox installations involve more than two units. The DOT recommends that additional boxes be placed on independent supports and spaced at a safe distance from each other. Stan-

dards suggest that supports be spaced apart at a distance equal to at least 75% of the height of the box and support--for instance, if the mailbox is 46" off the ground, the supports should be 34" apart.

When supports are separated in this fashion, the mailboxes shouldn't pile up in front of a vehicle that strays off the road--and the driver won't ride up over them as easily, losing control.

Also, there are commercially available multiple mailbox units. If you choose one of these, make sure it carries the AASHTO (American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officers) seal of approval.

Does all this really matter?

You bet it does. Not only will you meet the required highway standards and possibly save a life, you may also relieve yourself of a liability on your insurance, should there ever be an accident on your property.

It makes good sense to follow the guidelines put out by DOT. So plant your mailbox safely today!