



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on October 25, 2010

Uncle Sams Costly Sign Language

In uncertain economic times, Americans are looking for signs of improvement. The U.S. government, by contrast, is looking for improvement of signs — street signs, that is.

The 2009 [edition](#) of the Federal Highway Administrations *Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices for Streets and Highways* consists of 864 pages of detailed regulations covering everything from the color of pavement markings to the amount of space between letters on road signs. Among the regulations are requirements that street signs be produced in specific sizes depending on speed limits, converted from all uppercase to mixed case, and made more reflective at night. States and localities have until 2018 to comply with the new rules.



As one might expect, replacing almost every street sign in America is no small undertaking. The *New York Post* [reports](#) that its hometown will have to change 250,900 signs at a cost to the state of \$27.6 million. (The *Post* also points out that the feds typeface change requirement will even force numbered street signs to be replaced.) Milwaukee, [says](#) radio station WTMJ, will spend at least \$1.4 million to replace 80 percent of its 21,929 street signs. Wausau, Wis., estimates expenses will come to \$100,000 or more, [according](#) to WSAW-TV. The total cost to state and local governments will surely climb into the hundreds of millions of dollars.

The Highway Administration claims that its new regulations will improve traffic safety, but then it says that about all its regulations. Furthermore, bureaucrats seldom consider the costs of their mandates; as they are fond of reminding us, you cant put a price on safety at least as long as someone else is paying for it. Thus, writes the *Post*, the Highway Administration acknowledged that New York and other states opposed the change, and suggested that the use of all upper-case letters remain an option, noting that while the mixed-case words might be easier to read, the amount of improvement in legibility did not justify the cost and then the feds went right ahead and issued the regulations anyway.

State and local governments are already struggling to stay financially solvent during this recession. Washingtons piling on new, costly regulations whose benefits are almost certainly minimal cannot help matters. States and localities will have no choice but to raise taxes or to cut services in order to pay for all the new signs that the Highway Administration is now forcing them to purchase. Taxpayers, already stuck between the rock of high taxes and the hard place of recession, will now be squeezed even more tightly to cater to the whims of bureaucrats whose very jobs, let alone their regulations, violate the document that called the federal government into existence.

Just the same, the reader may be soothed somewhat by the words of Janette Sadik-Khan, New York City Transportation Commissioner. In reference to the Highway Administrations ruling that street signs may no longer be printed entirely in uppercase letters, she remarked to the *Post*, On the Internet, writing in



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all caps means you are shouting. Our new signs can quiet down, as well. There, now. Dont you feel calmer already?



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