

As Pedestrian Deaths Spike, Feds Take on Fanciful Crosswalks

The federal government wants an Iowa city to revert a crosswalk celebrating the LGBTQ community to the standard zebra design. It's a growing pattern.

[Daniel C. Vock](#) 10.23.2019 08:00 AM

Crosswalk designs like the rainbow stripes in San Francisco's Castro neighborhood add whimsy and character to city streets but don't comply with dry federal safety standards. Photograph: Jason Doiy/Getty Images

The city council in Ames, Iowa, just wanted to honor [LGBTQ](#) people during the local Pridefest. What the officials of the college town got instead was national attention and a showdown with the federal government.

The trouble started with the city's decision to repaint the crosswalks at a downtown intersection, using the patterns of the rainbow flag and transgender pride flag. The new designs evidently caught the eye of someone at the local Federal Highway Administration building two blocks away, because the agency soon sent a letter pushing the city to reconsider.

Federal engineers have long been sticklers for safety rules that call for roadway features to be consistent across the country. They want the crosswalks in Ames, Iowa, to look just like the crosswalks in Ames, Texas, and like those in Franklin, Texas, and Franklin, Maine. The rainbow bands the Iowa town put down looked nothing like the black-and-white zebra stripes mandated by national standards. So the highway agency sent Ames officials a letter warning them that the crosswalks did not comply with federal guidelines.

The city council ignored the warning and has kept the colorful crosswalks in place. "I don't think they have jurisdiction over the roads in Ames," city attorney Mark Lambert says. "These are streets purely paid for by city funds. I don't think they can punish us in any way."

That open defiance of the federal government has struck a nerve far from Ames. City officials, public artists, and the highway honchos have spent years in a nationwide battle over artistic crosswalks. Rainbow patterns can be spotted in San Francisco and Atlanta, as well as Ames. Baltimore has crosswalks that look like zippers. Piano keys connect the curbs near the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York. A checkerboard flag lies near the Nascar Hall of Fame in Charlotte, North Carolina. The highway agency has repeatedly warned city officials against such treatments but hasn't resorted to wielding its mightiest weapon: withholding the federal funds that states and localities often use to keep their roads in shape.

The debate has intensified as pedestrian deaths nationally have jumped by more than 50 percent in the past decade, to more than 6,000 in 2018. Experts have blamed the increase on factors including the proliferation of smartphones that distract both drivers and pedestrians, the popularity of ever-bigger SUVs, and road design that encourages speeding. That's one reason pedestrian infrastructure has entered the spotlight. For all the benefits of civic pride and creativity that reimagined crosswalks may provide, the question for the engineers who control the streets is whether they improve or impair safety.

One reason for the confusion is that few studies have looked at how drivers react to novel crosswalk designs. Even some that have been done are inconclusive. Oklahoma transportation engineers, for example, studied the effects of a crosswalk painted to appear in 3D, meant to improve safety at a crossing near a school. The design gave drivers the illusion that the stripes

were actually raised blocks. The engineers found that many motorists did slow down when they saw the markings, at least at first. But they also found that a significant number of motorists swerved to avoid them, replacing one dangerous behavior with another. "Additional study is needed to determine if installing a 3D crosswalk diminishes or enhances pedestrian safety," the researchers concluded in 2018.

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Pam Fischer, a traffic safety consultant

Very few states or cities have gone through the long, formal process of getting federal approval for their new designs. That's largely because the process is designed to test new technologies or designs that can then be used across the country, not for one-off projects that individual cities use to add a touch of whimsy. It calls for rigorous, scientific experiments, and by its very nature can address only one kind of new crosswalk marking at a time. Maybe 3D blocks are dangerous but rainbow patterns are even safer than the standard zebra stripes, or zippers are bad but buttons are good. The only way to know is to test each individually.

The Feds says the burden is on localities to prove their designs are safe. "While we maintain that traffic-control devices need to be uniform, consistent, and recognizable, the agency is open to collaborating with state and local jurisdictions that have ideas with the potential to improve roadway safety and performance," the agency said in a statement.

The very fact that these crosswalks are getting people to think about pedestrian safety is encouraging, says traffic safety consultant Pam Fischer.

“If we don’t try things, how do we know if there’s any value in it? We shouldn’t shut down these innovations because there’s been no evaluations,” she says. The federal regulations, which are published in the Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices, are themselves the product of a lot of trial and error.

In Baltimore, public artist Graham Coreil-Allen has helped install [several playfully designed crosswalks](#), from [hopscotch patterns](#) downtown to multicolored [foot, hoof, bird and paw prints](#) in a residential neighborhood. He says artistic crosswalks build a sense of community around the intersections. “There are a lot of other traffic-calming devices, but art crosswalks in particular get a lot of attention because they are artistic and they look different,” he says. Kids crossing the street on the way to school enjoy the patterns, which are often installed along with other safety features [like curb bump-outs](#).

Neighbors help design and sometimes even maintain the new patterns. Motorists respond, too, Coreil-Allen says. “A lot of cars slow down to see what this is. They see there’s an emphasis on this intersection, see that it therefore must be important, and they slow down.”

That larger sense of community may explain why places like Ames have pushed back on the federal government’s strict interpretation of road-safety standards. Lambert, the city attorney, says the city council was making a point when it approved the colorful crosswalks. “They wanted to send the message that, regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, race, etc., everyone’s welcome in this town,” he says.

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